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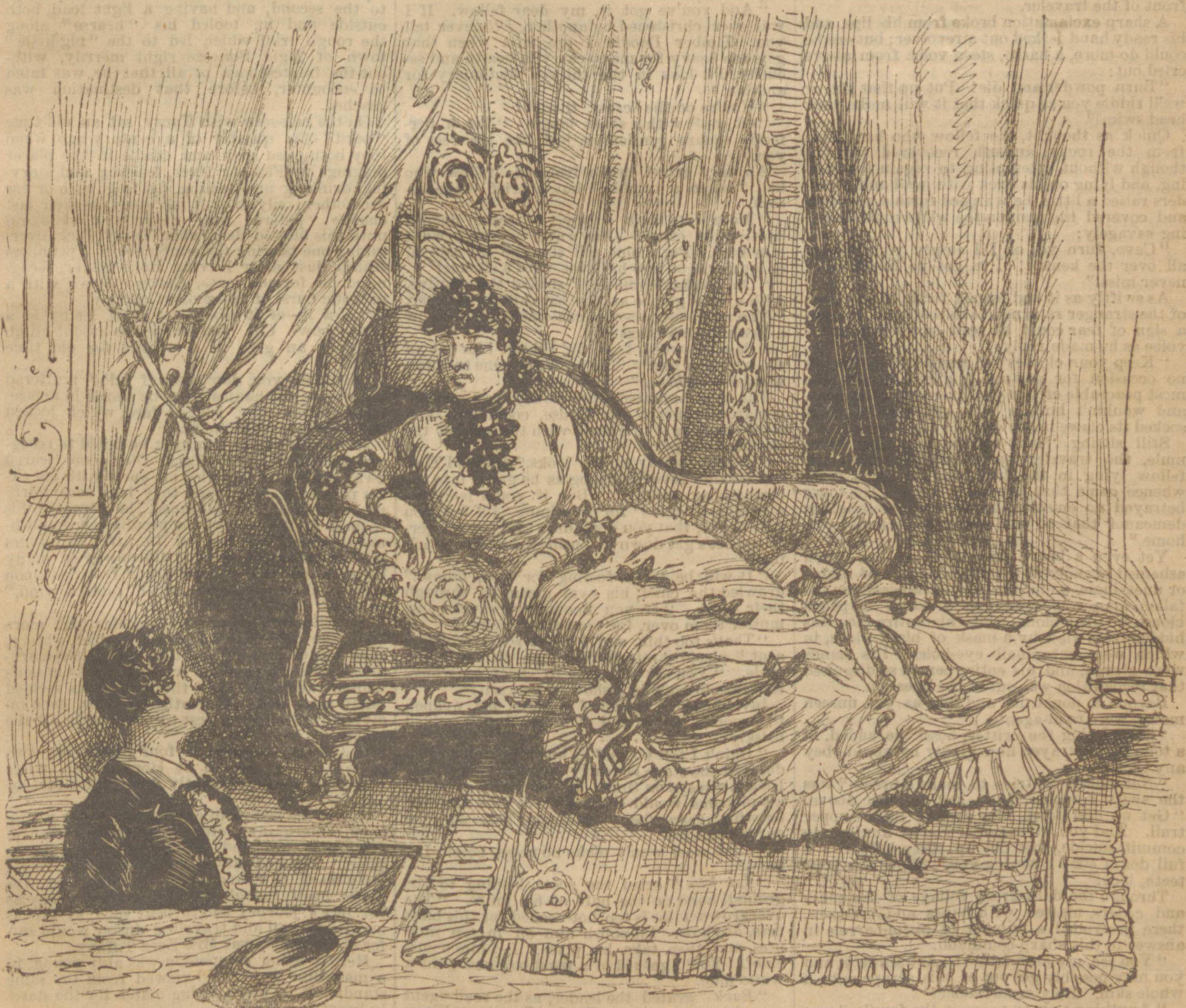
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PISTOL JOHNNY; or, One Man in a Thousand.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49," "THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



"YOU ARE SURE YOU ARE QUITE COMFORTABLE!" ASKED DAISY DARLING, LEANING FORWARD WITH AN ANXIOUS EXPRESSION ON HER CHARMING FACE.

Pistol Johnny;

OR,

ONE MAN IN A THOUSAND.

An Account of the Big "Circus"
at Tight Squeeze.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "JOAQUIN, THE TERRIBLE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"TIMBER DOODLE, FROM BITTER CREEK."

"Be it ever so humble, there's no place like—"

"Steady, Al Borak! What's the matter with you?"

A mellow, musical voice was awaking the echoes of the rocky hills with Payne's touching melody, one afternoon in the early summer of '79. The spot was a lonely one, near the crest of a ridge, where the rough stage road wound with many a turn and crook to avoid the huge masses of mossy, evergreen-shaded rocks which lay around in wild profusion; but the vocalist seemed as much at home as though in the crowded streets of a city, permitting his steed to pick its own way over the rough trail, wholly wrapped up in the song he was trolling, one leg carelessly thrown across the pommel of his saddle. Yet that carelessness was more in seeming than reality, for his balance was not in the least disturbed as his mount abruptly paused short, then leaped to one side, with a sudden snort of alarm.

"Quiet, my gentle wall-eyed gazelle of paradise!" muttered the traveler, stroking the neck of his charger, but casting a swift glance over the rocks with which the roadway was lined, as though suspecting there the presence of an enemy.

There came a rattling, scrambling sound from the point toward which the long ears of the white mule were pointed, and then, with an explosive grunt and angry curse, the figure of a human being rolled end over end down the rocks, landing in the stage trail, directly in front of the traveler.

A sharp exclamation broke from his lips, and his ready hand jerked out a revolver; but ere he could do more, a harsh, stern voice from above cried out:

"Burn powder and die! Put up that six, or we'll riddle you so quick that it will make your head swim!"

Quick as thought, the fellow who had fallen from the rocky ambush recovered himself, though without attempting to regain his footing, and lying on his back with head and shoulders raised a little, he whipped forth a revolver and covered the man on the white mule, snarling savagely:

"Cave, durn ye, or I'll empty your *cabeza* all over the kentry! I've got ye lined, an' I never miss!"

As swiftly as it had leaped forth, the weapon of the stranger returned to its scabbard, but not a sign of fear could be read in his face or his voice as he made reply:

"Keep your clothes on, gentlemen. There's no occasion for getting frightened. I'm the most peaceable critter you ever stumbled over, and wouldn't hurt a sick kitten, without it socked its claws in too deep."

Still sitting "lady-fashion" on his white mule, the traveler gazed placidly from the fellow lying in the trail, to the rocks from whence came that menacing voice. His tones betrayed no emotion, his face was smiling, his demeanor that of one who felt perfectly "at home."

Yet even a brave man need not have been ashamed of showing a certain degree of alarm or uneasiness, under the circumstances; for the fallen man was robed in a loose, shapeless blouse of gray cloth, while his entire face was hidden from view by a mask of black cloth, in which were cut small eye-holes. His hands were gloved, and his entire person so disguised that recognition was out of the question.

Beyond a doubt, he and his as yet unseen mates, were road-agents.

"Shell I plug the critter, boss?" he added, in a tone that betrayed how gladly he would obey any such order.

"Not unless he tries to make a break," was the swift response from the ambush above. "Get up and fetch him around by the upper trail. And you, stranger, if you're anxious to commit suicide, just cut up rusty. There's a full dozen sixes covering you. Show him your teeth, lads!"

Through the dark-green foliage of the pines and cedars, matted with vines and creepers, there protruded a number of pistol-barrels in answer to this sharp command.

"You see, my dear fellow? Act sensibly, and you may possibly get out of this scrape with a whole skin. Do you surrender?"

"Anything to keep peace in the family," was the cool response. "Where am I to go, and what do?"

"You're to come with me, an' at the fust crooked step or motion I'll jest everlastin'ly salivate you—mind that!" growled the fellow who had fallen from the rocks, rising and catching the white mule by the bridle, limping as he led his prisoner up the trail for a few rods, then diverging from it into a side path that finally led them around to the rear of where the ambuscade was laid.

Still cool and apparently not at all alarmed for the result, the stranger glanced around at the gray shapes which now surrounded him. But if he hoped to recognize any among their number, he was doomed to suffer disappointment.

There were six in all, each one garbed after the fashion of the outlaw who had so unintentionally betrayed the ambuscade. Only their eyes could be seen, and even those features were so altered by showing through the holes in the mask that there was no chance of ever recognizing them again.

No less curiously did the road-agents scan their captive, as he sat quietly on his big white mule.

Barely up to the medium height of mankind, slender and graceful in build, his body was well rounded, his limbs showing more muscle than might have been expected of a man of his size. His light-brown hair fell to his shoulders in curling locks. A neatly-trimmed mustache shaded his small, red-lipped mouth. His nose was slightly curved, his chin rounded like that of a woman, his eyes of a steel-gray color, keen and bright, but with a quizzical look in them now as he leisurely summed up his captors.

On his head was a broad-brimmed hat of white felt. He wore a black-velvet sack coat; white ruffled shirt, uncovered by vest; cloth trowsers, held up by a broad leather belt which supported a knife and brace of ivory-handled, gold-ornamented revolvers; riding-boots of fine leather, spurred at the heels.

"Who are you, and what's your name?" abruptly demanded the one among the road-agents who appeared to be the chief.

"Timber Doodle, from Bitter Creek, and I'm on the lookout for a job," was the prompt response.

"No nonsense! Your real name, I mean," impatiently.

"And you've got it, my dear fellow. If I was ever christened by another, I'll never tell you. Timber Doodle I am, and when that gets too heavy for me to carry in health and security, I'll look in the thieves' dictionary for another."

"You're on the 'cross,' then?"

"Oh, no!" with a short laugh. "I'm a perfectly square gentleman, just like the rest of you."

An ugly growl broke from the fellow who had "taken a tumble," but a brief while before.

"More like he's a spy, or some durned 'tective or other! Anyway, we don't want him here. Put a blue pill through his *cabeza*, or let daylight into his liver with a sticker!"

"Oh, go shake yourself!" sniffed the captive, with a side glance at the sanguinary speaker. "You're a sweet-scented customer, not to know a hawk from a buzzard!"

"Say the word, boss, an' I'll put him out of the way in a hurry. They ain't no time to waste with such as him!"

The chief hesitated; then slowly drew a revolver from beneath his blouse, cocking it, and slowly raising it to a level with the head of the smiling stranger.

"A neat tool, from the looks," drawled Timber Doodle, never flinching as he gazed into the threatening muzzle. "But if you'll lend me a hundred 'cases' for a minute, I'll bet you two to one, that you don't dare pull the trigger. Come, let's get down to business, and drop fooling."

"It will be sorry fooling for you, fellow!" growled the chief, his eyes gleaming through their holes. "If you know any prayers, just mutter them over, for your time's come!"

"That's too thin, and I don't scare worth a cent!" placidly retorted the man on the white mule. "You ain't a-going to shoot, so what's the sense in making a show of yourself?"

Involuntarily, the chief suffered his weapon to droop a trifle, and Timber Doodle added briskly:

"Didn't I tell you so? I know as well as you do, that the stage is nearly due, and that Tansy Dick is always on time. If you burnt powder, his pilgrims would suspect there was mischief brewing; then where would your little surprise party come in?"

"Cold steel won't make no noise, boss! Let me—"

"Let him!" cried the sport, leaping to the ground, hand on the haft of his knife. "The overgrown idiot is too hot-headed for this business, anyhow. I'll polish him off in ten minutes, and then take his place. Let him come, chief. You'll get rid of a wind-bag and gain a white man."

"Back!" grated the leader, as the road-agent was about to leap upon Timber Doodle. "When I want work done I'll give you orders. As for you," turning upon Timber Doodle, who coolly

broke in before the chief could complete his sentence:

"One word will settle my part of it, your honor. I'm out of a job at present. I'm not over particular what sort of work I do, providing there's money in it. You're laying for the stage, which is about due. In a job like that there's always room for one more. I'm in with you, and you can bet your boots I'll prove a full hand!"

"Wouldn't you like to run the whole job?" sneered the leader, as Timber Doodle paused to catch breath.

"It wouldn't be the first one, anyway," was the cool retort. "Tell you what I will do; lend me a dollar, and we'll toss up to see which bosses the job—you or me."

The chief made a rapid gesture, and instantly his men leaped upon the bold stranger, throwing him down and binding him hand and foot, despite his desperate struggles.

"Shape a gag and see that it is well placed," uttered the road-agent, as his men arose to their feet, leaving Timber Doodle lying on his back trussed up in rare style.

His orders were promptly carried out, and then he added:

"You can thank your lucky stars, young fellow, that I am in a merciful mood this afternoon, or I'd have called for cold steel instead of rawhide thongs. As it is, I may conclude to seal your nimble tongue after that fashion in the end. Let that reflection console you while waiting."

"Carry him back yonder out of the way, and hide that mule where it won't raise a row when the stage comes up. Lively, now! There's not much time to waste, if Tansy Dick is on time!"

Timber Doodle was picked up by the masked road-agents and borne back to a snug covert among the rocks, while Al Borak was tethered at a safe distance from the trail.

CHAPTER II.

A WARNING STRANGELY CUT SHORT.

As fate would have it, Tansy Dick was not "on time," that afternoon, though this deviation from his usually "sun-regulating" schedule came about through no fault of his own. He "pulled out" of "Horn Silver" station prompt to the second, and having a light load, both outside and in, toolled his "hearse" along the rough trail which led to the "big-little" town of Tight Squeeze right merrily, without the faintest idea of all that he was fated to encounter, before that destination was reached.

On the box-seat with Tansy, sat an old-time "pard" of a quarter of a century ago, when they both plied pick and cradle in the placer diggings on Feather river, feasting and starving, drinking and fasting, fighting with or for each other; only to drift far apart as their last chance "petered out," never to meet again until this blessed day, when Tansy Dick, overtaking one bearing the semblance of a penniless tramp, just after leaving Horn Silver, recognized his former mate, Catbird Jones, with a pathetic burst of amazement and joy.

"Kin it—if it ain't, my best leader is a muley cow! Cat, you durned heathen! climb up yere an' give us a whistle fer old time rocks!"

"Bein' it's you, don't keer ef I do!" muttered the tramp, mechanically, as he stared in amazement at the rosy, rugged face, which looked down on him from the box.

It was easy to be seen that he failed to recognize his old mate, but Tansy Dick soon cleared away the fog as he rolled on anew with his extra passenger, and when they had once fairly renewed their acquaintance, he repeated his request for a touch of the peculiar accomplishment, which had served to give Mr. Jones his "front name" and to while away so many hours in the past, when fortune frowned upon them, and they were forced to "dine on wind," or fast.

A little less clear and penetrating, more from the deteriorating effect of bad whisky, than age or lack of practice, but still remarkable for its compass and variety, the bummer's whistle rang forth until the rocky hills seemed fairly alive with the feathered tribe, each individual striving its best to out-whistle all the others.

Inside the stage were four passengers, two of whom had got on at Horn Silver, while the others were apparently from much further east.

One of the last-mentioned couple was a young lady, remarkably pretty even under the beauty-disguising dust and fatigue of a long stage jaunt. Tall and stately in form and carriage; jetty-black hair and eyes; a voice that was music itself, though growing rather sleepy as her day's journey lengthened; such, as far as her drawn vail and traveling duster would suffer observation, was Miss Zora Tiffany.

Her traveling companion was also young, in a masculine sense; and viewed from the same standpoint, he was a fitting match for the stately beauty.

Tall, athletic, handsome without being in the least effeminate; quick and graceful in his mo-

tions and speech; tolerably well-read and a lively conversationalist, a more agreeable companion for a young lady on a wearisome stage-route could not easily be found. With a tact of his own, too, for instead of pressing his attentions when Miss Zora drew down her veil and leaned back in her own corner, Woody Wilkinson relapsed into silence.

The third "inside" was a small, stoop-shouldered, white-bearded man of apparently three-score, whose rusty black garb, stiff stock and still stiffer speech, would have proclaimed him some old-fashioned preacher, had he not introduced himself as Zerub Throop, Esquire, who was bound for Tight Squeeze to locate as a lawyer, if prospects should justify.

Jack Meaders made the fourth passenger; a rough, tobacco-chewing, whisky-scented fellow in clay-soiled garb, who had the least to say of any forming the party, and who nodded and snored away the miles like one suffering from a protracted "tear."

All at once the "insides" were startled by the abrupt checking of the stage, accompanied by a loud curse from the lips of Tansy Dick.

"Road-agents, or I'm a bloomin' liar!" spluttered Jack Meaders, rudely thrusting Wilkinson back as the sudden halt brought them in violent contact.

A little scream from Miss Tiffany, a pettish grumble from the little lawyer; then a laugh from the lips of Wilkinson who had thrust his head out of the window on his side.

"It's only a woman, gentlemen. There's no cause for alarm that I can see," he hastily observed, drawing in his head and speaking more to reassure the lady than those whom he ostensibly addressed.

A woman it was, who sprung from the shrubbery which at this point lined the stage trail, wildly waving her hands before the mettled team, causing them to shy and fall back, even before Tansy Dick could jerk on the reins to keep his animals from trampling the strange creature in the dust beneath their iron-shod hoofs.

Pale and haggard, her long hair loosened from its fastenings and streaming in tangled luxuriance down her back, with eyes that seemed filled with an insane fire, she cried:

"Halt! For the love of heaven! turn back, or you are lost beyond redemption!"

Catbird Jones caught Tansy by the whip-hand, gripping him tightly, trembling like a leaf as he stared with whisky-bleared vision at the strange figure, gasping:

"Do you see it too, pard? Is it the real article or bev I got 'em ag'in? Don't go back on a old mate, Tansy—don't!"

"See it? Wish I didn't!" growled the disgusted driver, sending his brake home as the terrified horses pranced and strove to wheel around in the narrow trail. "Git out the way, you! D'y want to git run over—say?"

But instead of flinching, the woman came close, her voice filled with intense earnestness as she added:

"You refuse to take warning, but I am telling you the truth! The road-agents are lying in wait for you, to kill and rob! Turn back, while you can—I beg of you!"

Clearly these words came to the ears of the wondering passengers inside the coach, for by this time they had partially recovered from the confusion into which they were thrown by the sudden stoppage of the vehicle; but another oath came from the heavily bearded lips of Jack Meaders, and a wild light filled his eyes as he thrust his head through the window, then jerked forth a revolver, cocking it as he strove to cover the figure of the strange woman.

But Woody Wilkinson was quite as prompt in his actions, and with one hand grasping the burly digger by the shoulder and hauling him back, he deftly knocked the pistol from his hand, crying sharply:

"You drunken idiot! what are you trying to do? Would you murder a woman?"

"Let up, you!" snarled Meaders, striking savagely with a back-handed action at the young man, only to have his hand caught in a vise-like grip. "Woman be durned! It's all a bloody trick to rob an' murder us!"

"Listen!" sharply uttered Wilkinson, as the strange creature made her second appeal, in almost the same words as before. "Does that sound like it?"

"It's all a trick, an' durned ef I don't believe you're in cahoots with the gang!" growled the miner, struggling to free himself from that masterful grasp, but vainly.

"See, you," firmly muttered Wilkinson, his black eyes all aglow as he pinned the fellow still more tightly. "There's a lady present, and you want to choose your words a little more carefully, or I'll toss you out of that window, head-first!"

Both tone and look plainly meant "business," and so Jack Meaders appeared to comprehend, for he abruptly ceased his useless struggles to wrest himself free, sullenly muttering:

"All right. I reckon I kin stan' it ef you kin. But ef it is a trap, look out, you! I'll git in one lick, an' when I do, you'll think a hull mount'in hes drapped onto ye!"

All this passed with the rapidity of thought,

almost, and startled Tansy Dick had not yet time to make answer to the wild words of the strange woman before comparative peace reigned inside the stage.

By his masterly skill, he managed to calm his startled team, then angrily addressed the woman:

"What ye tryin' to git through ye, anyhow? Jumpin' out o' the bresh like a pizen ole witch! Serve ye right ef I was to 'rest ye fer a crazy loonatick—which I reckon ye ain't fur from bein', anyhow!"

"I'm not crazy," said the woman, speaking slowly, like one striving to overcome some great agitation, but still unflinchingly maintaining her position in the middle of the trail, where it was impossible for the stage to pass without running over her. "I am telling you the truth when I say that the road-agents are lying in wait for you—that they mean to plunder and slay—that unless you heed my warning and turn aside while yet there is time, you will suppose!"

"Whar is they, an' who be they? Kin you tell that?" asked Tansy Dick, beginning to be impressed by the earnestness of the woman, though her appearance and speech were both so wild and incoherent that his first thought—that she was insane—seemed by far the most plausible explanation.

Her ghastly pale face was marked here and there with little rills of fresh blood, which apparently came from cuts and scratches. Her hair fell partially over her face, and added to the blood and dust marks, rendered it impossible to scan her features closely or accurately. Her dress was torn and soiled, as of one who had lived long among the rocks and brambles, or else from a long and desperate flight over and through those natural obstacles.

"Just where their ambush is laid, I know not," the woman replied, speaking still with that painful slowness, as though she found it necessary to hunt for each word before pronouncing it. "I only know that they are waiting for you—the merciless gang of demons who call their chief King Philip!"

"How come you to smell 'em out? A woman like you?" and the first idea of the driver was rapidly returning.

"How, matters not. I swear that I speak the truth. You will find this out to your sorrow, if you persist in going on by this trail."

"Which I'd do though King Satan stood in the way, 'stead o' King Philip!" sturdily cried Tansy, his thin nose turning up in lofty indignation at the mere thought of his being turned from his route by simple fear of robbery or death. "I never yit lost a trip, an' I'm goin' through now ef it takes the hide off! Will you git out o' the road, ma'am?"

"You go to meet your death! They have sworn to rob and murder!" gasped the strange woman, uplifting her clasped hands like one in mental agony. "I beg of you, take warning! If not for your own sake, then for that of your employers—for that of your passengers! Turn back, ere it is too late!"

"Simply onpossible, ma'am," with a dogged shake of his head. "As fer robbery, this ain't no treasure coach, an' I reckon the imps 'll find mighty little oro in the mails."

"But you have passengers! I must see them! If there is a lady aboard—"

As she uttered these words, the woman darted toward the door of the stage, when Jack Meaders thrust his shaggy head and flaming countenance out of the window, crying sharply:

"You Nance! what ye doin' here in them duds?"

She stared at the ugly vision for a moment, her hands clasping her temples, then uttered a wild, moaning cry.

"He will murder me! He will murder me!"

Turning away, she fled wildly among the rocks and bushes.

With a sickly grin, Jack Meaders drew back his head, muttering apologetically to his astonished fellow-travelers:

"It's my wife, strangers, an' she's crazier'n a bedbug! She's bin that-a-way ever since we was held up by road-agents last fall was two year, an' she don't do nothin' but talk an' think 'bout the cusses all the time."

"But why did you try to shoot her just now?" demanded Wilkinson, suspiciously.

"I didn't know it was her, an' you wouldn't let me git a sight at her. She kin change her voice wuss then that whistlin' critter on top. An' then ag'in, I thought she was safe at the shanty, many a long mile from here."

"But I can't stop here an' she a-runnin' wild out yender. She'll git lost an' eat up by wolves, sure as a gun!"

Opening the door, Jack Meaders jumped out and darted away along the course taken by the screaming woman, who was now lost to sight and hearing.

Pale and trembling, Zora Tiffany had listened to this hasty interchange of words, and now touched her escort appealingly on the arm, whispering:

"That man was lying, Woody—I know it! He means the poor woman harm! Follow and save her—save her from being murdered!"

Wilkinson impulsively leaped to the ground,

but paused as the sharp voice of Tansy Dick smote upon his ears:

"Climb back thar, pilgrim, onless you wants to hoof it clean to town! I ain't got no more time to waste in this durn foolishness! Git in or git out—jest's ye see fit."

Wilkinson hesitated, glancing back at his fair charge. If there should be any truth in the wild warning of this strange woman, surely his place was with Zora, to guard and protect her against evil chance. If not—if the warning was but a dream born of a shattered mind—

Zerub Throop ended his indecision by declaring that he recognized the woman as really the wife of the miner, and insane. He entered, and the stage rolled rapidly away, Tansy Dick using voice and lash in his eagerness to make up for lost time.

CHAPTER III.

"A GRITTY LITTLE RASCAL."

"SAY, YOU!"

King Philip and his sable masked gang crouched in ambush among the rocks which overhung the trail, waiting with growing uneasiness and impatience the coming of Tansy Dick and his "bearse," when to their ears came those two words, sharp and cutting, yet full of a careless insolence that baffles description.

With one accord they turned in the direction from whence came the summons, and little cries of amazement and angry consternation burst from their covered lips.

Not twenty feet from their position, with his back leaning lightly against a huge boulder, with each hand filled by a double-action revolver, the pointed hammers of which were gently raising a trifle, then as quietly lowering again beneath the practiced fingers which controlled them, their muzzles completely commanding the road agents, they beheld the little man whom only a few minutes before they had bound and gagged and stowed away so safely—Timber Doodle, himself!

"Hands up and fingers empty, if you please, gentlemen!" this cool customer called out sharply, as the astounded outlaws showed signs of fight. "Keep your clothes on, my dear friends. I've got you in a box, but I don't want to drop the cover and sit on it, unless you foolishly oblige me to. Will you oblige me, gentlemen?"

Soft and smooth his tones—but it was the dangerous quiet of a crouching tiger, and there was a glittering fire in those keen gray eyes that warned the surprised road-agents to obey, or suffer even worse than that shameful humiliation.

And in silence their empty hands went up above their masked heads, while a low, amused laugh came from the red lips of Timber Doodle, as he noted the effects of his words.

"Gentlemen, you do me proud! Train under me for a week or two, and I wouldn't be afraid to match you against any other troupe in the same line of business."

"What do you want, and how the deuce did you get loose?" snarled King Philip, if, indeed, the chief of the road-agents was so named.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," nodded Timber Doodle, over a leveled tube that bore full between the twin eyelets in the chief's mask. "And yet, side-partners as we are fated to become, there should be no secrets between us. Know, then, that when you thought me fighting my best against the little ornaments you insisted on decking my hands and feet with, I was simply playing bugs on you all, and when I relaxed my muscles I could slip my hands out of the thongs. I did so within five minutes after you left me in that hole over yonder, and the rest was not difficult."

"That's what I did—now listen to what I didn't do."

"I could have stolen off, made a circumlocution, and warned Tansy Dick and his pilgrims that you gents were laying for him—but I didn't. I could have opened fire on you from the rear, and wiped you out so completely that Gabriel would have had trouble in finding you on the Last Day, and that before one among you all could have touched pistol or knife—but I didn't. Shall I tell you why?"

In savage sullenness the road-agents stood before the little man who held them so completely at his mercy. Soft his voice and smooth his words, yet each and every one of those syllables stung with the sharpness of a whip, and though he paused as if for an answer to his query, not a sound escaped the lips of a single one of their party.

"Terribly modest all of a sudden, ain't ye?" laughed Timber Doodle. "Wouldn't say boo to a goose? All right. I've got a tongue, and I'm not ashamed to use it, either."

"I didn't cut around to warn the stage, to clean you out without warning, simply because hawks don't prey on hawks."

"What do you mean by that?" growled King Philip.

"So you can talk?" drawled Timber Doodle, in mock surprise. "Good enough! We'll get on famously, now!"

"Come to the point, then."

"In other words, you're anxious to know why I didn't do so and so, instead of this and that?"

Pistol Johnny.

"Yes—if you will have it so," with a sour snarl.

"That'll do," with a short laugh. "A little bite of humble pie will be good for your stomach, and now I have brought you to your feed, I'll promulgate."

"I'm in the same line of business as you gents—or was before my old stamping grounds grew too hot and unhealthy for safety—and as I gently hinted at our first interview, I'm looking for a job."

"You're waiting for Tansy Dick and his hearse, and of course intend to strike him for all his trip's worth. I want to try my hand with you. Give me a share of the work and a share of the boodle, and I'm with you, heart and mind. Is it a whack, old fellow?"

"Don't ye do it, boss!" growled the outlaw, who had so unwillingly discovered the ambuscade. "It's some pizen trap the little cuss is tryin' to spring onto ye!"

"Will you hold your hush, bull-dog?" sharply cried Timber Doodle, turning the muzzle of one revolver on the suspicious rascal. "I'd mighty hate to waste a bullet on such worthless game, but if you chip in again without being asked, I'll have to do it."

"How am I to know that it isn't as he says?" doubtfully muttered the leader of the road-agents. "You're a perfect stranger to us, and may be a spy, for all we know."

"Oh, bush!" contemptuously sniffed Timber Doodle, spitting over one shoulder with an air of disgust. "You make me tired. Why, man alive! just brush the cobwebs away from over your wits, and look at the matter with your eyes open."

"If I were the sort of hairpin you seem to think, would I have taken all this trouble? When I held you under my pistols, and you never dreaming of such a thing, what was to hinder me from ticketing you to Hades by lightning express? And even now, with your eyes wide open, I could shoot down the whole six of you before the last one could draw a pop. I've got you foul. I hold you wholly at my mercy. Yet—look!"

As he uttered the word, Timber Doodle tossed the pistols to one side, stood proudly erect with his arms folded across his breast, facing the road-agents with a scornful smile curling his red lips.

For an instant the outlaws stood in mute amazement, taken wholly by surprise; but then, with a savage snarl, King Philip whipped forth a revolver and covered the smiling sport.

"It's my turn now, curse you!"

Though the menacing weapon stared him full in the eyes, not a muscle quivered, not the faintest trace of fear or flinching was visible as Timber Doodle confronted the chief. Instead, that scornful smile grew more pronounced as King Philip cried sharply:

"Now you bet! Up with your hands, or down goes your meat-house for good and all!"

Instead of rising, those arms closed more firmly across the swelling chest, and his voice was filled with a stinging scorn as Timber Doodle made reply:

"If you are low-down dog enough—if I have been fool enough to take a cowardly rogue for a man—shoot!"

For one brief moment, the life of the daring fellow hung upon a thread frail as a gossamer filament. The deadly weapon covered his brain, and the gloved finger was pressing the trigger. He could see this, yet his wonderful nerve never showed a sign of failing him. Proudly erect, coldly smiling, he stared the chief in the eyes. And then—the revolver was slowly lowered without being discharged!

"You're a gritty little rascal, if ever there was one!" exclaimed King Philip, the compliment extorted from him, despite himself. "Too gritty to kill like a dog, and yet—"

"It's got to be done!" growled the ugly ruffian who had seemed to thirst for the heart's blood of Timber Doodle from the very first. "Look yender! Thar she comes!"

All eyes instantly turned in the direction in which he pointed, and just crossing a sharp ascent, less than a mile away, they could catch a glimpse of the stage, advancing at a brisk rate.

A single glance sufficed to show King Philip this, and certainly his gaze was not averted from Timber Doodle more than ten seconds at the outside; yet, when he turned once more to the little man who had so scornfully defied him and his, it was to start back with a curse of astonishment.

In that brief interval, and without making noise enough to attract the attention of the road-agents, Timber Doodle had regained possession of his revolvers, and now, in his old careless position against the rock, he held them covered!

"If I can't have my fun one way, I will another, you can just bet your boots on that!" he laughed, clearly enjoying their surprise and discomfiture. "You wouldn't take me in as a partner, and now I'll spoil your fun, unless you knuckle!"

"You can't get away with us all," growled the discomfited chief. "Pull trigger and you die!"

"I'll come so mighty near it that there won't

be enough of you left to hold up the stage, anyway," was the reckless retort. "You don't deserve it, but I'll give you one more chance. Take me in on the ground-floor, and treat me white. Pledge your word as a brother hawk that you won't try any more of your dirty tricks on a mate, and I'll agree to follow your orders. Decline, and you'll not only lose the hearse, but your breathing powers as well. Out with it, old fellow!"

For an instant the chief hesitated. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but he saw that Timber Doodle was in deadly earnest—that he would shoot, and shoot to kill—and yielded.

"All right—you shall join us. But take warning, my bold fellow! At the first sign of crooked work, down you go, though it proves my own death-warrant as well as yours!"

"That is understood, of course, chief," said Timber Doodle, in a tone of quiet respect, very different from any which he had before used. "I'm regularly enlisted now, and bound to obey orders. I know the penalty, and will pay it without a murmur if I break the rules. Tell me the part I'm to play."

"You will see to the driver. If he refuses to halt on the instant, knock him over. You understand?"

"Like a mice! I'll just get my mule—"

"What for?" suspiciously, as Timber Doodle turned away.

"Lord love you, boss! I'm only half a man without Al Borak! And then, the sweet critter does so enjoy the sport, it would be a burning sin to disappoint him, now that there's a prospect of the old life coming back again!"

"I prefer keeping my men all under my own eyes."

"You think I'm going to run away?" laughed Timber Doodle, lightly. "All right, Al Borak shall come to me, then," and he uttered a peculiar whistle that caused the road-agents to start in suspicious alarm, for they more than half believed this a signal for the springing of some cunning trap.

Only for a moment, however; then the white mule trotted up to his master, who lovingly patted its pink muzzle.

"Now I'm cocked, primed and ready to go off!" guardedly uttered Timber Doodle, as the rattle of the stage wheels became distinctly audible. "I'll do my part, never fear!"

There was no time for further talk, for Tansy Dick was driving to make up for lost time, and was already in the narrow pass. A score of seconds, then King Philip shouted:

"Halt! Hands up, or die!"

Timber Doodle vaulted upon his mule and uttered a wild yell as the animal leaped through the shrubbery, over the rocks and into the trail, its master with pistols in hand.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAGEDY ON THE CLIFF.

THERE was very little of conjugal affection in the brutal countenance of Jack Meaders as he left the stage-trail behind him in his headlong pursuit of the strangely-acting being whom he had so suddenly discovered to be his insane wife, and it was anything but a look of love which filled his whisky-inflamed eyes as he glanced at the revolver which he had hastily caught up from the ground where it had fallen when Woody Wilkinson foiled his attempt to shoot the woman who warned them of road-agents.

He saw that its mechanism was uninjured, that the cylinder revolved freely, then glared ahead among the rocks and shrubbery, grating his tooth-stained teeth savagely as he failed to discover aught of the woman.

He paused abruptly as the sharp crack of a whip-lash came to his ears, and half-turned as though about to abandon his impulsive chase and hail the stage-driver; but with the rattle of wheels and the clatter of iron-shod hoofs, he shook his shaggy head with a savage scowl and still more savage snarl:

"Let it go an' be durned! They must manage it without me. That pizen critter mustn't run loose to squeal about all she's found out—Satan roast her over a slow fire!"

Few who could have heard that wolfish snarl and caught a glimpse of that worse than brutal face just then, would have felt like condemning the poor woman for fleeing in hot haste from the face of Mr. John Meaders. If insane, she betrayed but little madness in fleeing from his love-caresses!

He heard the stage go rattling away over the rocky trail as Tansy Dick hastened to make up schedule-time, but he cast no further look in that direction. Instead, his bloodshot eyes roved greedily over the ground ahead of him as he hastened in the general direction taken by the fugitive.

Occasionally he scrambled up a point of rocks or leaped upon a high boulder, to extend his range of vision, glaring wolfishly over the wild expanse of rock and scrub; but for a time it seemed as though he was doomed to disappointment—as though the woman he accused of being crazy and his wife, had luckily eluded him for the time.

But it was written otherwise, and before Jack Meaders had left the stage trail a half

mile behind him, he caught a brief glimpse of his prey, and leaped down from the rock on which he stood at the moment, showing his teeth in a devilish grin as he rushed vigorously onward.

"She saw me, too, durn her!" grated this conjugal model. "She give one yelp, and then turned tail like a frightened jack-rabbit! She knows who's comin'—but it won't do no good, my purty—not a mite of it! The ole man's a reachin' fer ye, an' what he reaches fer he most gen'ally gits, you bet!"

The discovery had been mutual. The hunted creature, already panting and almost heartbroken with the wild terror which had sent her away in blind and headlong flight as she recognized that shaggy head thrust through the window of the coach, had sunk down at the foot of a stunted pine tree, feeling that she could flee no further. But as she caught a glimpse of and recognized the ruffian, her powers seemed miraculously restored to her, and with a gasping cry of terror, she renewed her flight.

One backward glance, that showed her Jack Meaders in full chase, then she bent every energy to the one end; that of escape.

On, until her poor heart throbbed as though it would burst from her bosom. On, until her breath came only in hot, burning gasps, short and fitful. On until the wild landscape around her seemed to whirl and rock in a bewildering dance—until each crag and bush seemed to take on that hideous face and hated form and join in the pitiless death-hunt.

How far—how long that terrible race for life lasted, the poor, hunted creature never realized. She struggled on in blind terror, knowing nothing of the course she took, of the obstacles she surmounted, yielding only when overtired nature gave way, when even the menacing voice of that merciless villain proved powerless to spur her on. Then she dropped in a shuddering, panting, moaning heap of almost lifeless humanity.

Until within the last few hundred yards, Jack Meaders had strained every nerve in the effort to overtake the fugitive, but then, as he noted the direction the poor creature took in her last blind deviation, he slackened his reckless pace, with a frightful chuckle, for he knew that the end was now near.

"She's got to stop or tumble, 'less she sprouts out wings in a monstrous hurry!" he panted, with a hard, merciless laugh. "Two to one she'll jump over, ruther than take the chancies with the ole man!"

Eagerly, greedily, he watched her, then as she suddenly dropped, a curse broke from his lips, and he felt for the moment as though he had been shamefully defrauded.

"Jest like a woman all over!" he snarled, with a savage snort, as he hastened on. "Always contrary, an' never doin' what ye expect 'em to! A couple o' rods furder, an' the job was done without any more trouble. Cuss a w'man, anyhow!"

He paused beside the poor hunted creature, stirring her brutally with his foot, then glanced on to where he could see the escarpment of a steep cliff, over which he had confidently expected to see the woman plunge blindly, to meet death a full hundred feet below.

With a moaning gasp, the woman shrank from his rude touch, and endeavored to regain her feet. He laughed coarsely, and the sound of his voice seemed to restore a portion of her former strength, for she leaped to her feet, and staggered away in the direction of the precipice.

Jack Meaders made no effort to intercept her, but laughed loudly as the poor creature saw the frightful depth which cut off her further flight, pausing with a cry of despair.

"Keep right on, honey!" he grinned. "You can't find a quicker way o' gittin' shet o' the man, fer durned ef I'm fool enough to foller ye that short cut!"

One look she cast down that dizzy depth, then turned at bay, snatching a pistol from her dress and leveling it at the jeering brute.

With a startled curse, Jack Meaders leaped aside and squatted low, just as the weapon exploded. Swift as was his action, he did not entirely escape the lead of the hunted woman, but instead of piercing his black heart as she intended, the missile only tore through the fleshy part of his shoulder. And then, before she could fire again, he was upon her.

He wrested the weapon from her hand, tossing it far over the cliff, then clutched her throat with a savage gripe, holding her helpless while he looked at his wound.

A grunt of relief escaped his lips as he discovered its real nature, and twisting her to the ground, he held her there with one heavy foot, while he rudely bound up the injury.

"Now, you painter cat, I'll settle your hash!"

Little time as Jack Meaders had occupied in this work, it was sufficient for the woman to regain a portion of her natural nerve, brightened, perhaps, by the very extremity of her peril; and in a voice whose steadiness surprised the ruffian, she cried:

"You dare not injure me, Jack Meaders! Harm but a single hair of my head, and he will call you to account!"

A mocking, sneering laugh broke from the rascal.

"Why, you pore little fool! He'd be only too glad to git shet o' ye so cheaply. He's said more'n once that he wished you'd hev the good sense to croak your last!"

"A lie—black as your own foul heart!" panted the woman, passionately, but turning even paler than before and reeling a little, like one stricken a bitter blow.

"Your tongue says one thing, but your eyes tell a mighty dif'runt tale, honey-bird," grinned Meaders. "You ain't quite the blind fool you let on. You've lived with Tom Hurd long enough to git the love-dust pritty well breshed out o' your peepers, an' you know it's jest as I say—that the ole man has got clean tired o' ye, an' would be only too happy ef you'd hop the twig fer good-an'-all. Now, don't ye?"

There was a convulsive twitching of her swelling throat, as though she would have denied this brutal assertion, but not a sound escaped her then. Poor thing! deep down in her sore heart she knew that there was too sure a foundation for his cruel speech—that the man for love of whom she had abandoned all else on earth had indeed grown weary and discontented with her!

"It soun's mighty rough, I know that," added Meaders in a more quiet tone, as he removed his foot and permitted the woman to rise to her feet; "but all the same it's Gospel truth that I'm givin' ye. Even ef Thompson Hurd was staunin' right here, an' I was to tell him all you've tried to do this day, he wouldn't lift a finger's eend to bender me from slittin' your white throat—and ef I hung back, durned ef I ain'tbettin' big money he'd do the dirty job his own self!"

"What have I done?" slowly uttered the woman, with difficulty controlling her emotions sufficiently to speak clearly. "I have not injured you—have done nothing to harm my husband or awaken his hatred. Why do you utter such base and cruel threats against a poor, defenseless woman?"

"You didn't try to raise thunder down yender with the hearse, did ye?" sneered the ruffian, his wolf eyes beginning to glow anew as he uttered this speech. "You didn't try to skeer Tansy Dick into turnin' back? You didn't want to git a word with the gal pilgrim inside, to tell her what was waitin' on ahead fer her? Oh, no! you're mighty innercent, you be!"

"If I did—if I tried to save them from road-agents—what sin can you find in that?" she slowly uttered.

"Look here, Ma'am Hurd," and as he spoke deliberately, Jack Meaders tapped her on the shoulder with one stumpy finger. "Mebbe you ain't fully realizin' of it, but you're in a monstrous tight box, jest now, an' your only chainte o' gittin' out with a bull skin, is by talkin' right plum' at the bull's-eye o' truth. How come you to git wind o' what them road-agents 'lowed to do to-day? Which one o' the gang leaked?"

"None. I overheard them talking—"

"When an' whar, an' who was they?"

"They were disguised, and I could not recognize their voices," faltered the woman. "It was by the merest chance that I learned their plans. I was out for a walk, and stopped to rest for a moment, when they came by and hid themselves. I was afraid to move, until I heard enough—"

"That'll do," bluntly interposed Meaders. "I'd know it was a woman talkin' ef I hed my eyes shet. You're givin' me pure wind—"

"I can swear to the truth of what I say!" desperately.

"An' swear to a lie when you was doin' of it, too. Shell I tell you what you *did* hear? You hearn Tom Hurd say that he was tired of ye. That he wished you was dead or would run off with some other feller, so he could marry a prettier gal."

"It's false! He never said that!" she panted, angrily.

"You heard him say that the gal he was stuck on was comin' to Tight Squeeze by today's stage, an' that he'd take her fer his sheer o' the plunder, leavin' the big money she toted with her—"

"A lie!" passionately cried the woman, forgetting herself under the sharp sting which his cunningly chosen words contained. "I heard it all! He only wanted the money—he laid no claim to the woman—"

His exultant laugh cut her swift speech short, and one look into his grinning face told her how fatally she had compromised herself. With a low cry of despair, she bowed her head and covered her face with her trembling hands.

"You've hearn too much fer the good o' your own health, Ma'am Hurd," said Meaders, his horrible mirth abruptly vanishing from both face and voice. "You'll never live to tell what you found out!"

"You don't mean to murder me?" she gasped, shrinking back in horror as he stepped closer to her.

"It's a p'izen nasty job, but it's your life or our necks, honey," he said, slowly. "Even ef you was to swear ontel the sky turns green that you'd never peach, I wouldn't run the risk. You've got to go—that's no two ways about it!"

"You dare not murder me!" she cried, in desperation. "You were seen to follow me—I will be missed and sought for—you will be called to account for my dea'h!"

"I ain't a-goin' to kill ye," he said, soberly, but still with that awful light in his bloodshot eyes. "You run into the hills like a crazy woman. Ef they look fer ye, they'll find you down yender, without cut or bullet hole into ye an' they'll say what is boun' to come true—that you tumbled over the cliff an' killed yourself. Will you jump, or shell I lend ye a little boost as a send-off?"

Pale as a ghost, trembling in every fiber, she stared imploringly into his face, only to feel her heart sink still lower, for not a trace of mercy could she detect. Her fate was sealed beyond all hope.

Suddenly she grew calm, her voice steady and even.

"Grant me one favor. Give me time to breathe a prayer."

"It's a waste o' time, but ye kin hev it. Ef it don't do no good, it cain't do no harm, as I see," he muttered.

Facing him, she knelt and lifted her clasped hands, seemingly engaged in prayer. But all at once a glorious light came into her eyes, and stretching out her hands, she cried:

"Husband! help! save me from this demon!"

Jack Meaders, with a snarling curse, turned swiftly around, thrown off his guard by her sudden appeal, and as quickly the desperate woman leaped forward and tore the revolver from his hip, cocking and firing it point-blank at his heart as he was wheeling again, warned by her touch.

With a gasping curse, he reeled and fell, the nearly crazed woman darting away with a piercing, hysterical scream.

CHAPTER V.

"HELD UP" BY ROAD-AGENTS.

ACTIVE and sure-footed as a mountain goat, Al Borak leaped over the rocks and shot through the bushes, creepers and vines which served to mask the ambuscade of the road-agents, alighting safely with its reckless rider in the middle of the stage trail. Timber Doodle yelled wildly as he made that reckless leap, flourishing a revolver in each hand, crying out even before the hoofs of his white mule struck the road-bed:

"Down brakes, Jehu, or over goes your apple-cart!"

But the high-mettled team was not so easily controlled.

Nettled at having been delayed by the woman whom Jack Meaders claimed as his insane wife, Tansy Dick had called his keen-lashed whip into play more freely than customary, in his hopes of catching up to regular schedule time, and now his stock was in scarcely better humor than himself, and fought against the bits, rearing and plunging until it seemed as though they must trample the white mule and its rider beneath their hoofs.

Sharp and cutting rang out the voice of Timber Doodle:

"Will you take a hint, Tansy, or must I send you over the range, with drag broken and brake out of kilter?"

Crack! crack! each revolver exploded, so near together that the double report might easily have been mistaken for but one, and Tansy Dick squatted low down on his seat as his hat fell on the top of the coach behind him, and his pet whip was cut in twain by the second bullet.

"Durn it!" he howled, his voice a ludicrous mixture of bodily fear and indignation. "Ain't I doin' all I kin? You mought as well kill a man as skeer him to death!"

Within the stage, all was confusion when that sharp challenge rang out above the rattle of wheels and clatter of hoofs, intensified by the abrupt stoppage of the coach, which cast the trio into each other's arms. A terrified scream from the lips of Zora Tiffany, a whine from the old lawyer, and something very like a curse on the part of Woody Wilkinson as he struggled to clear himself and draw his weapons.

A single glance showed King Philip that Timber Doodle was fully competent to play the part assigned him, and giving his men the word, he scrambled hastily over the rocks to the road below, revolver in hand.

Two of the robbers sprung to the heads of the snorting wheel-horse, quickly bringing them under subjection, while King Philip and the others looked after the passengers.

"Twenty minutes for refreshments!" cried the chief, with a grim sort of humor, as he strode up to the stage door. "Roll out, gents, if you please!"

Apparently anticipating no resistance, King Philip caught the handle of the door and tore it open, just as Woody Wilkinson thrust forward a revolver and fired point-blank at his head, not two feet from the muzzle.

With a grating curse, the road-agent staggered back, at the same time throwing up his pistol-hand and discharging his weapon, seemingly without any attempt at taking aim.

It was a curious affair from beginning to end, and but for the blind terror which appeared to

overcome the wits of Zerub Throop, the termination might have been very different.

As King Philip ordered them to alight, the little lawyer gave a gasp of dismay, and stooped as though to dive beneath the seat, either in a vague hope of hiding, or, it may be, to conceal his valuables. In doing so he came into sharp collision with Wilkinson, disturbing his aim, and the lead which would otherwise have crashed its way through the brain of the bold road-agent, simply pierced the black mask and cut a shallow furrow along one cheek. Not only that, but as King Philip fired in turn, Zerub Throop, with a spasmodic kick and scramble, upset the blinded young man, causing him to plunge headlong through the open door, striking violently against the outlaw.

With a savage curse, King Philip dealt him a blow that knocked him to one side, where he lay without motion on his face, a little rill of blood showing clearly against the white stones which paved the road.

As she beheld the fall of her escort, Zora Tiffany forgot her terror and impulsively leaped out of the stage, sinking on her knees beside the luckless young man, catching his bruised and bleeding head up in her arms, sobbing hysterically as she flashed a look of horrified anger up at the chief, crying:

"May Heaven's blackest curses follow you through life for this brutal deed!"

"The fool brought it on himself," growled King Philip, with an angry snarl that might well have abashed a hungry wolf. "He had fair warning—and I give you the same. I'm a sleepy kitten when I'm not crossed, but smooth my fur the wrong way and you'll wake up a hungry tiger!"

But Zora Tiffany did not hear his coarse, threatening speech. She wiped away the mingled dust and blood from the face of the young man who had fallen in her defense, sobbing painfully as she bowed her face to his, kissing him with a wild abandon that might have aroused pity in the bosom of a savage.

Even the fierce road-agent seemed affected by the sight, for he stooped and, with gentle force, lifted the body from her arms, examining the injury with a practiced skill, then rising again with a short, hard laugh, saying:

"Come! don't be silly and make a show of yourself, my dear. He's not killed. It's only a graze, and he'll be all right in a minute."

Abruptly turning away, he covered the stage with his pistol, crying sharply:

"Tumble out of that hearse, you pilgrims, unless you're anxious for me to turn it into a corpse-carrier, sure enough!"

Only a whining groan answered him, and with a grating curse he strode forward, and catching hold of one heel, dragged the trembling lawyer from beneath the seat under which he had sought refuge.

"It's a case of assault and battery—I call you all to witness, gentlemen!" quavered the little fellow, as he fell to the ground.

"Let up on your whining, or it'll be a case of justifiable homicide!" growled King Philip, rolling the lawyer over with a contemptuous thrust of his foot. "What are you howling about, anyway?"

"I'm a man of peace, and I gave you not the slightest cause for this brutal assault," quavered Throop, shrinking away from the masked outlaw. "But an action will lie—"

"And so will you—cold and stiff as a wedge, if you give me any more of your lip!" sharply interposed King Philip with a menacing gesture, which caused the little lawyer to retreat hastily backward until his heel struck against a projecting point of rock, whereupon he sat down with a good deal more emphasis than grace.

"There was another pilgrim!" cried King Philip, peering into the empty vehicle, then glaring up at Tansy Dick. "What has become of him? No lies, now!"

"He jumped out an' run away after a woman critter that tried to make us b'lieve a gang o' road-agents was lyin' fer us—durn fools we that we didn't listen to her!" muttered the disgusted stage-driver, still held beneath the aim of the little man on the white mule.

"A woman!" exclaimed King Philip, evidently alarmed or deeply annoyed. "What woman? Who was she and what did she say? Out with it, curse you!"

"A crazy woman we-all tuck her to be, but I reckon now that her *cabeza* held a heap more sense than our bull outfit," and Tansy Dick mentally kicked himself for his obtuseness.

Up rose the outlaw's pistol, and he cried sternly:

"None of your side-talk! Give it straight and short, or I'll blow you to never-come-back-again in a hurry! Squeal!"

Tansy Dick was no fool. He saw that the chief meant business pure and simple, and as briefly as possible he narrated the strange encounter on the road which had thrown him off schedule time.

In silence King Philip listened. His mask effectually concealed all emotion which he might otherwise have betrayed, and when Tansy Dick completed his recital, he turned away without a word of comment.

Woody Wilkinson was recovering his scattered senses, under the tender ministrations of Zora Tiffany, for the bullet of King Philip had only glanced along his skull above one ear, stunning him for the time being, but doing no particular harm so far as the future was concerned.

He made an effort to arise and draw a weapon as the chief of road-agents came forward, but with a cat-like quickness, King Philip leaped to his side and disarmed him.

"You'd better go slow, young fellow," he cried, sharply. "I'm ashamed enough of the shot I made a bit ago, and if you oblige me to burn powder again, I'll wipe out that record in your heart's blood. Try and behave yourself, like a little man, and you'll live all the longer for it. Stand up, and see how high you can reach with your flippers!"

"For my sake—do not anger him!" murmured Zora, clinging to the young man's arm and aiding him to arise.

This appeal from the woman whom he loved better than his own life, together with a sense of his utter helplessness in his present weak, unarmed state, led Woody Wilkinson to obey.

Backing his order with a cocked pistol, King Philip made Catbird Jones dismount from the driver's seat, and together with Zerub Throop, stand in line alongside Zora and Woody, all with their hands elevated above their heads.

Then, overseen by King Philip from his position near the passengers, the road-agents entered the stage and thoroughly ransacked it. A shout of exultation from one of their number caused the eyes of their chief to glow and glitter through the holes in the mask which concealed all other features, but a snarling curse broke from his lips as the robber tumbled out and held up a fat pocketbook as his prize.

"That's my property!" quavered Zerub Throop. "It dropped out of my pocket, and I hadn't time to pick it up—but it wasn't lost, and you can't in equity claim a reward."

"Shut up, *you!*" growled King Philip, striking him across the lips with the back of his empty hand. "Another howl like that, and I'll send you where even gold would melt like snow!"

But that pocketbook was the only valuable found inside the stage, and his voice hard and stern, King Philip addressed the passengers as they stood in line:

"I know that one of your number started on this trip with a large amount of money. It was to secure possession of that wealth that I halted this hearse. It must be on your persons, somewhere. I give you your choice: fork over, quietly, and you may go your way without injury. Refuse, and it will be found by a search—and *I'll kill the one I find it on!*"

His voice was that of one who meant every word he uttered, and a swift interchange of looks took place between Zora and Wilkinson; but before either of them could speak, if such was their intention, the clear voice of Timber Doodle came:

"I say, boss, you've forgot one little item, hain't ye?"

King Philip turned toward him with a savage snort.

"What do you mean by that, curse you?"

Like magic the indolent, lounging attitude of the little man on the white mule changed to one full of life and action. Clear and commanding rung out his voice:

"That I'm ringmaster in this little circus! Chaw dirt, you infernal thieves! Down ye go, from master to dog!"

A double report, and the two men at the wheelers fell, each with a bullet through his brain!

CHAPTER VI.

A CHANGE OF RINGMASTERS.

So sudden and wholly unexpected was this startling action on the part of Timber Doodle, that, though his strange speech had drawn their attention toward him, as they stood at the heads of the wheel-horses, neither of the two outlaws made an effort to save themselves, and it may well be doubted if they ever realized the fact of their lives being in peril.

Without cry or moan they sunk in their tracks, with the unerring lead of the little man on the white mule crashing through their brains.

With a deer-like bound, Al Borak carried its master still closer to the surviving road-agents, halting in a position that enabled Timber Doodle to cover them all with his doubly-armed hands, his voice ringing out like a clarion:

"Empty fingers or empty skulls—take your choice, gentlemen! I've got you foul. I can kill you one and all before the nimble-fingered in the lot can pick a trigger!"

With the broad-brimmed white felt hat pushed far back on his forehead; with his steel-gray eyes glittering as they glanced along the leveled tubes from whence had already come two death-notes; with the white mule half-squatting, its fore-feet braced just as it landed after that swift bound—the gritty little fellow who had given the curious name of Timber Doodle, held

the surviving outlaws wholly at his mercy, forming the central figure in a tableau well worth representing.

The huge stage, with its four horses wildly prancing, newly alarmed by the deadly fire which had relieved them of the strong hands at their bits, and Tansy Dick still on the box-seat, ribbons in hand, but too intensely astonished by the swift and incomprehensible change which had come over the scene to do more than mechanically keep his cattle from dashing away in headlong flight.

The trio of passengers, still standing with hands uplifted; the four figures in sable disguise, staring wildly through the holes in their masks at the slayer of their mates; the two bleeding figures at the feet of the plunging wheel-horses; all combined to make a wildly realistic picture.

But the tableau was of brief duration.

Whether he was really of bolder, more decisive stuff than either his chief or his fellows, the squat ruffian whose luckless tumble from the ambush among the rocks above the stage-trail had led to this strange scene, uttered a snarling cry of defiance and swiftly throwing forward his pistol-hand, took a snap-shot at Timber Doodle.

But still more actively the little man ducked his head and the ragged lead spent its force on the rocks beyond, while a spout of smoke streamed out from beneath the white mule's throat, and the reckless road-agent staggered back, spinning around on his heel, dropping his weapon and tearing spasmodically at his throat and giving vent to a frightful, gasping gurgle as he fell heavily to the rocky soil which he liberally sprinkled with his life-blood.

King Philip, as his follower gave that shout of defiance, uttered a fierce yell and seemed about to leap upon the bold rider of the white mule; but Woody Wilkinson, realizing that it was do or die, sprung upon him, striking out heavily with his unarmed hands, then grappling with the road-agent chief.

They fell to the ground together, tight-locked in each other's arms, growling and struggling like maddened wild beasts.

Pale with horror and heart-torn with fear for her escort, Zora Tiffany sunk upon her knees, hands clasped and pale lips praying for his preservation and success.

But the greatest of all was the change in the little old lawyer, Zerub Throop. From being racked with fear and trembling, he seemed suddenly possessed by a valorous spirit, and throwing himself bodily upon the struggling men, he howled:

"Kill him—murder him—don't let him get away! Shoot and carve him! It's no crime in the eyes of the law, for he begun it—he dealt the first blow—*Ugh!*"

An explosive grunt burst from his lungs, and a savage kick from one of the combatants sent him staggering, reeling away, to sit down with far more force than bodily comfort.

One of the road-agents tried to cover the little man on the white mule, but a lightning shot not only disarmed him, but shattered his fingers in a shocking manner, drawing a howl of agony from his lips and most effectually taking all the fight out of him for the time being.

Seemingly of its own accord, the white mule sprung forward as the fifth outlaw turned to seek safety in flight, and Timber Doodle cried out sharply:

"Halt! you cripple! or I'll send a blue warrant after ye! Drop your gun and elevate your dukes!"

If heard, this warning was unheeded, and for an instant the fugitive was covered by the deadly revolver of the new ringmaster, requiring but a touch of the finger to send his crime-stained soul fleeing after those of his fellows who had gone before. But that pressure was not given. It looked too much like cold-blooded assassination to shoot down a fleeing wretch who would not even turn at bay, and Timber Doodle took both pistols in his left hand, then swung himself low in the saddle as the white mule sped along.

He clutched a fragment of rock, and rising in his saddle once more, hurled the missile with so sure and swift an aim that the fugitive fell in his tracks, most effectually disposed of for the time being.

Without a second glance at the fallen outlaw, Timber Doodle wheeled and galloped back to the scene of the attempted robbery, a cry of angry rage escaping his lips.

Zerub Throop had partially recovered from that sickening kick in the stomach, and with a knife in hand, staggered to the spot where the two men were still struggling desperately. He hovered over them, watching his chance, all the time spluttering savage threats against King Philip, and just as Timber Doodle turned toward the scene, he bent down and made a fierce thrust with his weapon.

A sharp cry of pain followed, and as the little lawyer started back, King Philip tore himself loose and staggered to his feet, leaving Woody Wilkinson lying there bleeding.

"Halt!" cried Timber Doodle, enforcing his commands with leveled revolvers. "Up with your flippers, King Philip, or I'll make a

vacancy in your upper department! I mean business!"

Zerub Throop whirled around and there came a sharp report as a bullet sung close to the ear of the little man on Al Borak, cutting a little lock of hair in its passage.

Swift as thought, one of his pistols covered the lawyer, who dropped his weapon, uttering a whining cry:

"Don't—don't shoot! It went off of itself! I didn't know it was loaded—on my professional honor!"

"Crawl into that hearse and hide yourself under the seat, you little varmint!" sternly cried Timber Doodle. "You are too pesky careless to keep the company of gentlemen. Git! And take care you don't have any more accidents, unless you carry a rich insurance policy."

Zerub Throop looked as though he would like to argue the case a little, but something in the glittering eyes of the stranger warned him to await no more favorable opportunity, and he stumbled to the stage and crawled inside.

Though the many swift changes have consumed considerable space in the narration, that justice might be done to all those concerned, the transformation was so rapid that one might easily have held one's breath from the beginning until the victory was won, and Tansy Dick could hardly realize the fact before the sharp voice of Timber Doodle was heard calling:

"I want you, driver! Jump down and make yourself useful. Loosen the tugs and your cattle will stand, I reckon. I want you to play sheriff's deputy for a bit, and tie the hands of these black-avised gentry. Lively, if you please!"

"Durn it, boss, I *cain't!*" muttered Tansy, uneasily.

"Why not? I'm holding them covered, and I'll empty the skull of the first one that tries to make a break!"

"It's all right fer *you* to talk," dolefully uttered the driver, shrinking away as one pistol muzzle covered him for a second, then turned again upon the crippled outlaw. "You don't hev to go over the trail every day, like *I* do. How long d' you reckon I'd run the route ef it ever got out that I tuck a hand in this game? I'd git picked off, *sure!*"

"In plain words, you're a coward!" jeered Timber Doodle.

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no. I kin fight, ef I'm crowded; but I'm hired to drive, an' nothin' else. Look at it your own self, boss, an' you'll see the sort o' box you're puttin' me in."

"But if you are compelled to do it, by fear of death?"

"That's a different thing, an' a boss of quite another color," promptly replied Tansy, with a shrewd twinkle in his little gray eyes that spoke plainer than words.

"You climb down from that box and carry out my orders, without any nore racket, or I'll fill you so full of lead that somebody will file a mineral claim on your corpus! I'm a bad man from 'way up Bitter Creek, and I never speak without saying something! Will *you*, or shall *I?*" cried the little man.

"You're all witnesses, ladies an' gents," cried Tansy Dick, nimbly alighting. "I'm doin' it in fear o' my life, you want to understand, an' ca'se I cain't holp myself!"

Having thus guarded his future, Tansy Dick proved no sluggish assistant, and five minutes later King Philip was in durance vile, lying on the broad of his back, with ample opportunity for reflecting over and cursing the disagreeable mutability of Dame Fortune.

Stout bonds were also applied to the two road-gents who had survived that brief but desperate engagement, and while Tansy Dick was thus engaged, Timber Doodle put up his pistols, and dismounting from Al Borak, passed over to where Zora Tiffany was kneeling beside luckless Wilkinson, binding up his left arm, through the fleshy part of which Zerub Throop had driven his knife-blade.

"Do you think the little famished rat really meant it for you?" asked Timber Doodle, with an ominous glitter in his steel-gray eyes. "If he did—"

"I think not," interposed Wilkinson, as the stranger half turned toward the stage, hand on pistol. "I could hear him calling to me to kill the road-agent. I reckon he made a missstroke in his excitement."

"I don't!" positively uttered Zora, with an angry flash in her eyes. "I believe he is in league with those terrible wretches, and that he really tried to murder you both."

"I don't take much stock in the varmint, myself," said Timber Doodle, with a short laugh. "I'll keep an eye on him, and get at the bottom facts before I lose sight of him."

"But you—how can we thank you, sir, for your gallant conduct?" and with trembling voice and unsteady hands, Zora stepped toward him, pausing as he fell hastily back.

"By saying nothing more about it, lady. I only performed my duty, as any other man would have done under the same circumstances. As for touching your hand—you forget that there is human blood on mine."

Pistol Johnny.

"Shed in our defense!"

"Still, they are none the less stained, and therefore unfit to press yours, lady," he persisted, turning away before she could speak further.

"Get a rope, Tansy, old fellow, and we'll see if we can't rig a purchase for hoisting up these rascals."

"You don't mean to hang 'em?" exclaimed the startled driver, staring open-mouthed at the speaker.

"Why not?" with a short laugh; "it will come to that in the end, or common rumor most shamefully belies the inhabitants of Tight Squeeze! But that wasn't exactly my meaning. I'm going to give you a few passengers for the remainder of the trip, and it would be impolite to crowd the regulars or to make them ride outside. So we'll hoist our game up to the hurricane-deck. Think we can make the rifle?"

It was no easy matter, for neither of the captives would assist at their own transportation; but with a noosed rope, and what aid Wilkinson could lend in his almost crippled state, both the dead and living road-agents, still disguised in their black masks and gray blouses, were hoisted to the roof of the stage and there firmly tied to the rails, to prevent them from falling off, either involuntarily or with a view to escape.

With a whispered caution for Wilkinson to keep an eye on the little lawyer, Timber Doodle closed the door and leaped on Al Borak, giving Tansy Dick orders to drive on.

Right willingly was he obeyed, for not only was the honest fellow anxious to complete his run with as little more delay as practicable, but he was burning up with eagerness to relate the story of his strange experience. And many a glance did he cast around in quest of Timber Doodle, fearing that mysterious worthy would vanish as abruptly as he had put in an appearance; but in this he was agreeably disappointed, for when the stage rolled into Tight Squeeze the white mule and its rider were in close attendance.

An unusually large crowd was awaiting them in front of the one hotel which Tight Squeeze could boast at that period, curious to learn why Tansy Dick, usually so prompt to time, had been delayed so long; but when, in the growing dusk, they discovered the ghastly freight on the roof of the stage, a flood of questions were poured upon the driver.

Nothing loth, he gave a rapid synopsis of the tragic events, reserving the right to elaborate his story when there was more time to spare, but giving Timber Doodle full credit for the defeat and capture of the road-agents.

In answer to the enthusiastic calls for the name of the man who had accomplished all this, Timber Doodle leaped lightly from the saddle to the box-seat, bowing low as he said:

"You do me proud, gents! As for my handle, it is John Woodcock, better known, perhaps, as Pistol Johnny, from—"

"Alias, King Philip—thief, murderer and road-agent!"

CHAPTER VII.

PISTOL JOHNNY'S "PLATFORM."

SHARP and distinct rung out this supplemental sentence in a shrill, high-pitched voice, apparently issuing from somewhere in the midst of the excited crowd, but the actual author was not so readily decided upon.

The startled crowd scattered as though a loaded shell had suddenly dropped into their midst, each man staring hurriedly around him in quest of the bold person who had flung this defiance into the teeth of one who had single-handed gotten the best of a road-agent gang, and whose nickname of Pistol Johnny had been won by many a swift and dexterous exhibition with the deadly tools he carried.

As the first sound of that peculiar voice cut his own words short, Timber Doodle—or John Woodcock, to give him the more dignified title to which he laid claim—shot his steel-gray eyes keenly over the gathering, seeking to fix the bold speaker, but in vain.

A brief, breathless silence followed that sudden scattering of the crowd, then Pistol Johnny coolly retorted:

"You can't hurt a Christian by shooting stink-pots from ambush, my gentle unknown! I'm only a little, insignificant cuss, with barely wealth enough of my own to keep me from coming on the town for support, but I've got money that says you daren't show your classic countenance and sing that sweet song over again!"

Again a breathless silence. Once more the interested inhabitants of Tight Squeeze shot swift, eager glances through their own ranks, searching for one whom they were fated not to discover. For no response came to the bold challenge of John Woodcock, even when the hero-admiring Tansy Dick forgot his customary caution and enthusiastically yelled:

* To the uninitiated, it may not come amiss to say that the woodcock, that dearest of game birds to the heart of the true sportsman, is frequently called "timber doodle," which fact may serve to account for the choice of a *nom de guerre* made on the spur of the moment.—THE AUTHOR.

"Two to one the yelpin' coyote dassent show his dirty mug to honest white men! Four to one that ef he does, my side-pardner hyar, Pistol Johnny, will git away with him so quick it'll make your head swim! An' ten to one that I'll git so crazy bedbug drunk over the funeral, that I won't be able fer to tell my wheel-hoss from a Heely camel! Put up or shet up! Shoot, Luke, or give up your gun!"

A general laugh broke from the crowd at the earnestness with which Tansy Dick issued this triple challenge, and under cover of it, Pistol Johnny leaped to the ground and opened the door of the stage, assisting Woody Wilkinson to alight, then making way for him to lend the same service to Zora Tiffany.

Eager to escape the curious crowd, the young man hastily led his fair charge into the hotel, while Pistol Johnny adroitly covered their retreat by taking position on the wooden steps of the hotel, directly beneath the huge lamp which shed a reddish light over the scene.

"Gentlemen, and two-legged ornaments to the classic precincts of Tight Squeeze: I don't ask you to lend me your ears, because I am not in the fancy pickling business at present, but I do beg for a few moments of your valuable time."

"Hear! hear!" howled Tansy Dick, enthusiastically.

"Dip lightly, old fellow, or these gentlemen will begin to suspect that I have hired you to blow my bugle for me," laughed Pistol Johnny, waving his hand toward the driver, whose heels were beating a diabolical tattoo against the footboard, while his long lashed whip rent the air with a volley of pistol-like reports.

Tansy instantly subsided, and Pistol Johnny resumed:

"As I was about to remark, when our enthusiastic friend on the box-seat created a diversion, gentlemen, I'm not going to make a speech, for that's out of my regular line of business.

"Favored by chance and a good bit of luck, I've brought some game into camp, which will be all the better if promptly looked after by some of your city authorities—say the marshal or chief of police. Are either of them present?"

"Which we hain't got neither one nur'r other," bluntly interposed Tansy Dick. "The town runs herself, mostly."

"At least you have some place where prisoners such as these can be safely kept?" persisted Pistol Johnny.

"Run the pi'zen critters up a tree at the eend of a rope an' they'll keep safe enough!" cried a coarse voice from the crowd, and the manner in which this brutal cry was taken up and echoed back by others, told how popular the idea was, and how little it would require to set a howling mob on foot.

Active as a panther, Pistol Johnny leaped to the side of the stage, then nimbly climbed to the roof, where he stood in a defiant attitude, the lamp and starlight shining on his drawn weapons, as he spoke sharply:

"No lynch law in mine, if you please, gentlemen! No doubt the prisoners richly deserve punishment, and punished they shall be, if there is any law in this section; but it must be according to Hoyle, as long as I can play a trump! I took the trouble to bring them here alive, and they shall have a fair trial, or you can set up another tombstone in your graveyard, and carve on it the initials of yours truly!"

"I'll prosecute 'em!" squealed Zerub Throop, thrusting his head out of the window in the stage door. "I'm a lawyer, but I'll not charge you a cent for my services!"

"It's justice we want, not law," pointedly retorted Pistol Johnny, turning the muzzle of one weapon toward the head of the little lawyer, as though by accident, causing an immediate eclipse of that member.

As he spoke, one of the prisoners struggled to a sitting posture, having loosened or broken the thongs which held him fast to the guard-rail, and in the voice of King Philip, cried:

"If justice was done, you would be here, one of us, bound after the same fashion! You—our chief—the bloodiest one in all the gang—to prate of justice!"

His head fell back, but his object was at least partly accomplished. The crowd began to eye Pistol Johnny with growing suspicion, and he was quick to see that his bold exploit might easily end in knotting a noose around his own throat.

But not a sign of this fear could be detected in his voice or countenance as he spoke again:

"What I'm tryin' to get at is this, gentlemen: I want a few good and true men to serve as guards over the prisoners through this night. They can be tried for their crimes in the morning, if a majority of your number so decide, but unless close watched to-night, they may turn up missing. I've the best of reasons for believing that the gang to which they belong have secret friends and allies in this town, and if I am correct, there may be an attempt made to rescue them, unless good watch and ward is kept. Who will volunteer?"

An almost unanimous cry came from the crowd, but Pistol Johnny was a close observer, and suspected the hidden facts.

Without moving his lips sufficiently to be detected by the crowd in general, he muttered to Tansy Dick:

"You know the crowd better than I do. Pick out half a dozen good fellows, and volunteer yourself. I'll pay you any reasonable price for your trouble."

"Durn the pay!" muttered Tansy, with a sniff of indignation. "What ye take me fer, anyway? A bloated hog?"

Leaping to his feet, the worthy driver declared his intention of playing death-watch for the night, whereupon Pistol Johnny begged him to select his own boon companions to share the honor with him.

"You can do it better than I, a perfect stranger in your midst. I might pick out one-half lynchers, the other portion road-agent sympathizers, and then there'd be a Kilkenny-cat circus, sure enough!"

Under cover of the general laugh which followed this remark, Tansy Dick selected half a dozen men on whose fidelity and nerve he knew he could place full reliance, and after a little consultation, a temporarily unoccupied cabin near the upper edge of town was selected for the place of confinement.

This portion of the affair satisfactorily concluded, the little sport rose erect on the stage-roof once more, and removing his hat, raised one small hand with a commanding gesture.

Instantly silence fell over the gathering, all curiously eying the small, trim figure of the man concerning whom so many wild rumors were going the rounds of the mining-camps.

"Gentlemen," Pistol Johnny began, his voice clear, distinct, grave. "When I set out for this city, I had only one object in view. A gambler by profession, I wanted to meet some of your square sports across the table, and either make a few ducats or leave my little pile to my masters with the papers.

"Chance threw me in the way of these road-agents, and I was, in a measure, compelled to take them in out of the wet. I did so, the best I knew how, and brought the survivors here to be dealt with as the law might direct, eager to wash my hands of the whole affair, and then attend to my proper calling.

"In self-defense I'm compelled to shift my platform, for within the last half-hour or so, I have twice been charged with being one of the gang—even King Philip, as their chief appears to be called.

"Where I am known, such an idea would not be entertained for a moment, but here I am a stranger to you all, and I have senses keen enough to see that some among you half-suspect me to be crooked. I don't blame you for it; I'm only stating the facts of the case. I freely acknowledge that I'm no model character. I am a professional gambler. I take an occasional drink of good liquor. I have had a few rows, in the course of which somebody has happened to get hurt. But I do claim that I'm a white man and no cowardly thief to strike an enemy from under cover of a mask.

"I take an oath before you all, as witnesses, that I will never touch a card in play until I have brought the real King Philip into camp, dead or alive, and effectually broken up his gang of masked cut-throats!"

With uncovered head, Pistol Johnny raised his right hand as though calling on Heaven to record his vow, his tones grave and stern, his steel-gray eyes gleaming vividly.

A low murmur ran through the crowd, but none spoke.

"I know that within hearing of my voice are friends and sympathizers of the unholy gang I have taken an oath to destroy, if not actual members of the band, but I am rather glad than otherwise. I'm not going to make a still-hunt of it, and a victory over a wide-awake enemy is so much the more to be proud of. If King Philip has any friends present—if one of our captives be not the chief himself—I trust he or they will hasten to warn the gentleman that Pistol Johnny is going to take his trail in sober earnest, with a trusty force, if possible; if not, then alone and single-handed!

"I would like a dozen good and true volunteers, to aid me in this hunt. I will pay each man one hundred dollars per month, in advance if required, as proof that I am dealing on the square. I'll guarantee them one month's wages, even if the campaign doesn't last a week."

For a moment there was perfect silence as Pistol Johnny concluded, but then a clear, musical voice called out:

"Two to one, in thousands, Pistol Johnny, that you'll take water or turn toes up for good inside of a fortnight!"

CHAPTER VIII. A MISSING PARENT.

WOODY WILKINSON conducted Zora Tiffany into the hotel rather hastily, for he knew from past experience that the inhabitants of Tight Squeeze were readily rendered enthusiastic, and neither the young lady nor himself were in proper condition for submitting to a public interview or reception.

A glance showed him that the landlord had deserted his office to join the excited crowd before the hotel, and after a momentary hesitation, he led Zora up the steep, narrow flight of stairs which led to the upper story. This he was enabled to do without entering the bar or office, as the stairs started from a little entry to one side of the public room, and was provided with a separate entrance from the street.

The building itself was but little more than a shell, hastily run up to meet a pressing want, but thus far in the history of Tight Squeeze, it had proved quite sufficient to accommodate all guests. The camp had not fully realized the brilliant future which had been marked out for it by the original founders, and transient custom was slender.

The building was but a story and a half, though it covered considerable ground, and the room to which Woody Wilkinson conducted his fair charge, being situated near the front center of the building, was not disfigured and cramped by the sloping side walls which seem to have been invented for the express purpose of developing phrenological monstrosities among their luckless occupants.

This room Wilkinson unlocked with a key which he took from his pocket, and as he noted the little look of surprise which Zora gave him, he hastily explained:

"I thought it best to bring you at once to my room, rather than keep you waiting while I hunted up the landlord. It will serve your purpose for the time being, and as soon as your father comes—"

"Why was he not there to meet us?" a little anxiously interposed the maiden, sinking wearily down upon the edge of the narrow bed and tossing aside her hat, pressing one hand to her heavily throbbing brow. "He must have got my letter—he could hardly have miscalculated our arrival?"

Wilkinson himself was a little uneasy, though he was careful to conceal that fact from Zora, knowing how it would augment her own uneasiness.

"You know what a crush and excitement there was when we slipped out of the stage. No doubt he failed to catch sight of us then, and has not yet learned of our arrival. If you will try and make yourself comfortable here, I'll go and hunt him up."

Changing the key to the inside of the door, with a light, off-hand recommendation for her to lock the door and open it only when summoned by a familiar voice, Woody Wilkinson took his departure in search of the missing parent.

Standing just within the shadow cast by the lintel, the young man keenly scrutinized the men who were so eagerly listening to the hasty recital of Tansy Dick, but without recognizing the form or features of the being whom he sought.

Involuntarily his brows contracted and the uneasy light deepened in his dark eyes, for he knew how much depended on the speedy meeting of father and daughter, and he felt that something serious alone could have kept Felix Tiffany from being there to greet them promptly on their arrival.

Satisfied at length that the man he sought was not in the crowd, Wilkinson singled out the burly landlord, and tapping him on the shoulder, was greeted with unexpected warmth.

"So ye hev come back—which I knowed ye would, let 'em say what they mought 'bout you an' him," chuckled the fellow, keenly eying Wilkinson as he suffered the latter to draw him back into the deserted bar.

"What who have said? What do you mean? Of course I have come back. Didn't I say I was coming?" sharply demanded the young man, nettled by the words of the landlord, though he could not fairly understand their significance.

"Yes, you did, an' I knowed it was all right so fur as you was consarned, let the old gent peter out as he mought."

"Look here, Tinker," sharply cried the young man, his grip tightening on the arm as he spoke rapidly. "Follow the main lead and no branching off. Where's Mr. Tiffany?"

"You tell, fer durned ef I kin!"

"What do you mean? What has happened to him?"

"Thar you've got me ag'in. Thar's a heap more'n me would like to hev that question answered, jedgin' from the talk which they hev slung around so mighty free of late days. Nobody kin say fer sure what hes happened to him, but thar is plenty who ain't slow in sayin' that he run away fer the good o' his own health, though—"

That stern grip was suddenly shifted from shoulder to throat, and Wilkinson glared sternly, almost savagely into the dull orbs of the shrinking landlord, as he muttered:

"Take care, Saul Tinker! You are speaking of my friend and a man of honor! I'll not hear him slandered in his absence without defending him—mind that!"

"You needn't be so durned brash about it!" muttered the landlord, sulkily fingering his throat as Wilkinson released him with the stern warning already recorded. "Ax the boys ef

I didn't say from the fust that it would all come out right in the eend. Ax 'em ef I didn't say that you would settle up all scores when you got here, an' ax 'em, ef you like—"

"One word," sharply interposed Wilkinson, as Saul Tinker was edging cautiously toward the outer door. "You say Mr. Tiffany has gone? When was he seen last?"

"Nigh onto a week ago."

"How did he go?"

"Nobody kin tell that, or else they lie like blazes!"

"Then he did not take the stage?"

"Not from this ranch, nor any other as fur as I kin find. He jest disappeared like, nobody kin say how or wharfo'."

"You are sure he left no message for me—no word or letter?" persisted Wilkinson, thoroughly puzzled, for unless Saul Tinker was telling the plain truth, he was displaying a far greater degree of adroitness and powers of dissimulation than even his closest acquaintances had ever given him credit for possessing.

"Not with me, nor anybody that I knows on," was the unequivocal response. "He went up to your room onces, but you tuk the key away with you, an' of course he couldn't git in."

Woody Wilkinson turned abruptly away, not caring for the landlord to note the sudden light which came into his eyes at this remark. He remembered that Felix Tiffany carried a key that would unlock the door to his, Wilkinson's room, and he felt a vague hope that some token might be found within those walls by which the mystery could be solved.

He regretted having taken Zora to the room; but that was beyond the power of remedying now, and he hurried back up the stairs, just in time to intercept Zora, who was emerging from the little chamber, her dark eyes glowing with anxiety.

"I'm so glad you have come back!" she exclaimed, as he joined her, both passing into the room again. "Where is father?"

Wilkinson hesitated, at a loss for words to begin, when he was saved that trouble by Zora, who nervously handed him a carefully sealed envelope, bearing his name in a bold hand.

"I found it on the stand, under the lamp, and recognized father's handwriting. The seal was unbroken, so it must be a letter written since you went away. Open it, quick!"

Strong man as he was, Woody Wilkinson's fingers trembled like those of one with the ague, as he tore open the envelope and drew forth the inclosure. More than ever he regretted having taking Zora to this room, for now she must learn the exact truth, no matter how heavily the blow might fall.

Until this evening, not the faintest suspicion against the honor and integrity of Felix Tiffany had ever come to his ears or into his mind; but if there was nothing wrong—if Zora's father was wholly on the square—why had he vanished from Tight Squeeze so suddenly and mysteriously? Why had he taken such pains to hide this communication, instead of leaving it at the office where it would be certain of prompt delivery on his return?

With these reflections flashing through his mind, Woody Wilkinson opened the letter and hurriedly glanced over it, purposely standing so that Zora was unable to catch a view of the contents. And as he read, the perplexed look deepened on his brow, for the missive only served to make the mystery all the deeper, instead of clearing it away.

A low, startled cry from the lips of the maiden aroused him, and he saw her face growing very pale as her dark eyes closely scanned his tell-tale countenance.

"Something has happened to him!" she gasped, sinking back on the edge of the bed. "Tell me—what is the matter?"

Puzzled, with his brain all of a whirl, Wilkinson saw that any attempt at evasion would be worse than useless, and without a word he handed her the paper, holding the lamp so its dull light fell fairly upon the written lines.

There was neither date, address or signature, but they were both familiar with the missing man's handwriting, and neither of them for a moment doubted its genuineness. Zora read it rapidly, half aloud:

"Strange events have occurred since you left here, and I write this under a temporary cloud. I trust that this will never meet your eyes, but it is best to be prepared for the worst. If matters clear up, so I can return before you get back, I will destroy this. If not—if you discover it—I earnestly beg of you to reserve judgment until we see each other, or I can communicate with you again."

"Invent some plausible tale to keep Zora—Heaven bless the darling child!—from worrying over my absence. Ask no questions outside; answer none; wait patiently for my coming or a message from me."

"I need not tell you that I am wholly innocent of wrong-doing. All shall be made clear, however black the case may at present appear against me."

That was all. Not a word that could throw any light on the mysterious affair, beyond the one fact that the absence of the writer was voluntary.

Pale, haggard-eyed, her beautiful countenance filled with a vague fear, Zora Tiffany looked up into the face of her friend, as though seeking

there the comfort which could not be found in that strange, incoherent letter.

"You know as much as I do, darling," he gravely whispered, as he stooped and touched his lips to her brow. "I learned below that your father had disappeared most mysteriously, nearly a week ago, leaving not the slightest clew behind him. From a word which the landlord happened to drop, I conceived the idea that perhaps he might have left a message here to explain the reasons for his absence."

"It does not sound like him, yet it is certainly his handwriting!" murmured Zora, again scanning the letter.

"There can be no doubt on that point."

"Then what does it mean? Why all this mystery?" cried the maiden, clasping her brow with both hands. "I only know that you brought me a letter, bidding me trust all to you—to leave all save the money he had on deposit and accompany you to this place, where he would meet us, and explain all. You would tell me nothing in answer to my questions—"

"Because your father made me promise not," was the grave interposition. "But now that he is not here to explain, and we cannot say when he will return, I feel that I am absolved from that pledge."

The explanation which Woody Wilkinson then gave, may be condensed into a few sentences, though his recital consumed hours in the telling.

Felix Tiffany had left Zora at his home in the East, when he came to Tight Squeeze in hopes of increasing his already large fortune, acting on the advice and information given by Woody Wilkinson, son of an old friend. Through him, Tiffany had bought a half interest in a mine owned by one Thompson Hurd, a gambler and dissipated man, who had won the claim at cards, and who took little interest in developing it. Wilkinson, by a course of secret investigating, found proof that the mine bade fair to prove wonderfully rich, and acting on his advice, Tiffany tried to buy out Hurd. The latter seemed to suspect something of the truth, and named a high price. Half drunk at the time, he refused to take a note or draft for the mine, and as a last resort, Wilkinson was sent on to bring back the money, with more to properly develop the mine. He had long been the accepted lover of Zora, and he was to bring her with him, when they were to be married directly after reacting Tight Squeeze. On this point, however, Wilkinson touched but lightly, realizing how delicate was the situation in which they so unexpectedly were cast by the strange disappearance of Tiffany.

"Your father remained here to guard the secret from discovery, if possible, for as Hurd would sign no transfer until the cash was placed in his hands, he would immediately raise his figures should he learn the truth as I tell you."

"But—will it be honest?" faltered Zora, timidly.

"If we pay his own price, why not?" a little evasively replied Wilkinson. "Hurd is a drunken, worthless gambler. The claim cost him nothing. And yet, the loss of a day may prove fatal to our hopes! At any moment he may learn why we were so anxious to buy, and then—But let it pass for now. You are weary and require repose. Try and sleep, since you say you can eat no supper. I will see you early in the morning, and then we can consult on what course is best for us to follow," he added, again gravely touching her pale brow with his lips, more like a brother or a father, than an ardent lover who was soon to be united to her in the holiest of ties.

CHAPTER IX.

"SHE'S A DAISY, SHE'S A DARLING!"

"HARK! from the tombs a doleful sound!" mockingly cried Pistol Johnny, with a keen glance in the direction from whence that clear voice with its stinging challenge had apparently proceeded. "Another county heard from, and still the Government lives! Chin-music is cheap, but it won't pass current for corn-juice across a well regulated bar nowadays. If there is anything in the shape of a body attached to that sweet voice, will it oblige by materializing for a moment?"

"Hey, presto pass—and here she am!" rung out the musical voice, and a trim, graceful figure suddenly leaped from the crowd, upon the hotel steps, where the red light of the lamp fell fairly upon it.

A quick cheer broke from the crowd as those composing it recognized the one who had flung that mocking challenge full in the teeth of the gritty little sport who had created such a sensation; and the sneer which curled the lips of Pistol Johnny faded away as he keenly scrutinized the stranger.

Seemingly about five feet, four or five inches in height, erect in carriage, though without a suspicion of stiffness; a rather slender frame, though with each limb rounded and shapely, indicating a goodly share of muscular strength, coupled with great activity; a clear skinned, beardless face, fresh and healthful as that of a schoolboy; red lips; jetty-black eyes and clustering curls of the same lustrous hue; small and neat hands, white and carefully kept,

adorned with rings that flashed and sparkled in the red lamplight.

Shining patent-leather boots on the small feet; trowsers of black broadcloth; a frilled and embroidered shirt; a small black velvet jacket, cut after the Spanish fashion, and serving only to cover the back and shoulders; a silk hat of the latest style, rakishly cocked over one eye.

The very beau ideal of a "dandy bantam," such as only the wild West can produce in all its perfection, where a dwarf is as good as a giant, if he carries "the tools" and has "the sand" to use them promptly.

Such was the impression one would receive at the first glance, but Pistol Johnny saw more. He noted the suspicious fullness of the chest, the trim, round waist, the smooth, beardless face, and felt confident that no man, but a woman, confronted him with that mocking challenge.

"Two to one, in thousands, Jack o' the Double-sixes, that instead of bringing in King Philip, dead or alive, you'll either take water when the Dutch courage begins to wear off, or the illustrious road-agent will give you a free pass to Hades within two weeks from date!"

Pistol Johnny doffed his hat and bowed lowly.

"I most humbly beg your pardon, ma'am, if I have trodden on your toes inadvertently. That King Philip had friends and well-wishers present, I felt tolerably confident, but I hardly expected to see a lady take up the cudgels in his defense."

"I reckon the King can defend himself when the occasion arises," was the cool retort. "Stick to the target, Johnny, and no scout-firing. You say you are going to bring King Philip in—I say you can't make the rifle."

"So be it," with another low bow. "I never talk back to a lady, and stand ready to swear every word is gospel truth, even before it falls from your fair lips!"

"Oh, quit! You make me tired!" drawled the nondescript, partly averting her face and languidly fanning the air with one little paw.

The crowd laughed boisterously, and a hot flush colored the cheeks of Pistol Johnny, for even his extraordinary nerve was not proof against ridicule from one of the softer sex.

Another swift change came over his strange adversary; the drawling tones became quick and stern, while every word and gesture indicated business, pure and simple.

"You can't crawl under that excuse, Pistol Johnny. When I put on this rig, I assume it with all the responsibilities, and to all intents and purposes, I am a man. I drink, smoke, fight or make love with the best of the rufflers, and those who pick me up for a flat, are mighty apt to drop me again as a sharp. I ask no odds from the best of the boys. You are a stranger in this camp, or you would know this without telling. You know it now, so come down to business."

"I hate to win a lady's money—"

A sharp, mocking laugh cut him short.

"Then you might as well pull up stakes and seek some other range, my dear fellow, for your occupation here is gone, unless you can conquer that silly scruple. I own or control every faro-table in or around Tight Squeeze. If you bet at all—and you claim to be a professional sport—you've got to bet against my money, for there's mighty few short-card players here, and not a game can you get up among those few, if I but lift a finger and put my *taboo* against you."

"Indeed!" and Pistol Johnny lifted his brows in surprise as the dandy sport paused to note the effect of this speech. "You speak with a good deal of confidence, Miss—Mr.—"

"Daisy Darling is my Sunday name, but I only use it when on my good-behavior. When I'm out on the fly in forked dry-goods, I shift my top-side cog, and answer to the bail of Dandy. As your eyes have doubtless told you, I am sporting the regiments at the present moment, and the fellow who thinks to get on the soft side of my other and better half by pouring taffy into my auriculars, is simply preparing a surprise-party for himself."

"So much for so much. You're a sport; so am I. You came here to make money by betting, and, like all the rest of us, naturally prefer a soft snap to those where the odds are even or against you. It's your misfortune and my good luck that I've got hold of the ripe end of the banana, for if you decline the bet I'm offering you now, I'll post you through the whole region as a duffer who travels on wind, instead of ovo!"

"Once more—King Philip against Pistol Johnny for three goose-eggs with a healthy figure at the head for a hatcher! Money talks! Put up or shut up!"

With remarkable volubility the dandy sport rattled off this explanation and the challenge which followed it, standing on the hotel steps with feet widely planted, hat cocked so far over forehead that the smooth, rounded chin was thrust outward and upward in order to see from beneath the hat brim, while the cigar from which curled a spiral of blue smoke, stood almost perpendicularly in one corner of the red-lipped mouth.

In tone, words and manner lurked an insin-

gence that made the hot blood rise to the cheeks of Pistol Johnny and his eyes to sparkle with a reddish light. Though Daisy Darling claimed to have discarded the privileges and immunities of her sex with their garments, still she was a woman and could not be treated as one of the opposite gender.

In a tone as soft and smooth as that which she had made use of, Pistol Johnny replied:

"That settles it, then! You've put me in a hole with only one git-out place to it, and for the credit of old Bitter Creek, I'll have to win your ducats—with one proviso."

A groan of mock despair broke from the red lips, and the dandy sport cast a woeful glance over the grinning crowd.

"Get ready to go down into your clothes, lads! Pistol Johnny wants to take up a collection so he can cover my bet!"

"Correct!" cried Pistol Johnny, now as cool as his adversary. "I'm a tenderfoot in Tight Squeeze, but if I'm any judge of the pure white article, there's not a man within the sound of my sweet voice who would hesitate for a moment in chipping in liberally for the purpose of making up the amount—and saving this lady from personal loss. Make up her stake, and I'll cover it, big or little!"

Daisy Darling was the one taken by surprise, now, and her eyes flashed angrily at the unexpected turn which Pistol Johnny gave to his speech; then, swift as thought, her little right hand shot forward, clasping a revolver, and the evening air was rent by a sharp report.

Pistol Johnny caught the motion, but never flinched or moved a muscle to escape what appeared like certain death. With that cool, tantalizing smile, he gazed at the flushed face of the unsexed sport, a low, careless laugh parting his lips as the weapon exploded, and he distinctly felt the bullet brush his temple in its whirling passage.

"My Darling Daisy, have you forgotten the golden rule by which your charming sex are—or should be—governed? If you want to hit one thing, aim at another! Take another shy!"

For a brief space it seemed as if this advice was about to be acted upon. The angry woman held the scoffing speaker covered, this time with an unmistakable accuracy. A slight pressure of her finger would send Pistol Johnny down to death with a bullet through his brain, and not one there present knew this more certainly than he did; yet still his truly remarkable nerve proved equal to the test.

Still, even those who liked him least could not with justice accuse him of bravado. There was nothing arrogant, nothing of boasting or blustering gasconade in his attitude. It was simply an exhibition of true grit, of unadulterated "sand."

The dandy sport lowered her weapon, but spoke sharply:

"I took you for a wind-bag, but now I see my mistake. I beg your pardon and congratulate you in the same breath. For if you had shown the slightest trace of the white feather, salt couldn't have saved you!"

"You do me proud, lady—"

"Stop!" and once more the revolver covered him. "When I wear these clothes, I'm a man! Call me lady again, and I'll show you that I can shoot to kill, as well as to graze!"

Pistol Johnny bowed low, then replied:

"I stand corrected, and will not offend again. More—if any person in my presence dares accuse you of being a lady, I'll shoot him on the spot—or any other vital point!"

An almost general snicker ran through the crowd, but as Dandy Darling glared hotly around in quest of the delinquents, each and every face donned a ferocious scowl as they turned to aid in her search. Her face hotly flushed, her jetty eyes fairly flashing fire, her white hand tightly clasping the ivory butt of the revolver, she resembled some dainty volcano in human shape, just on the point of bursting forth to rain death and destruction around her.

But then, with a violent exercise of will, she recovered her wonted *nonchalance*, at least outwardly, and putting up her weapon, laughed lightly as she addressed the cool sport:

"I owe you one, Pistol Johnny, and I never remain in debt over night, if I can help it. But now to business. Do you take my bet—the bet of Dandy Darling—or do you weaken?"

A peculiar whistle escaped the lips of Pistol Johnny, and in answer Al Borak came trotting up alongside the stage, with a shrill *he haw!* Lightly the little sport dropped upon the back of the white mule, and fumbled about the saddle for a moment, then held up a snug package, from which he extracted a couple of bank-notes.

"Money goes, and there's my thousand. As Tansy Dick is the only gentleman in Tight Squeeze with whom I am at all acquainted, I presume you have no objections to my naming him as stakeholder, at least until we can agree upon some other?"

"Tansy is good as a National bank," was the quick response, as the dandy sport came down the steps and counted out the amount for which she had bantered Pistol Johnny. "You understand the terms of the bet, Tansy?"

"We'll draw up a little agreement in the morning, and then there can be no possible chance for dispute," said Pistol Johnny, quietly. "And now, Mr. Darling, as that point is settled, permit me to explain the proviso to which I made allusion when you so politely interrupted me."

"If I am so unfortunate as to win your money, I'll enlist the heels of Al Borak here to blow out my brains."

"What do you mean?" was the sharp demand.

"Simply that I may not have to endure the disgrace of being pointed out as the one who took the money of a—gentleman," smiled Pistol Johnny, with a low bow.

For a moment Dandy Darling gazed steadily at him, then turned abruptly away and vanished in the darkness.

Pistol Johnny pressed through the crowd in the opposite direction, making a rapid *detour*, coming out at the rear of the hotel, where he leaped to the ground with a low whisper in the long ear of his mount, then darted swiftly in the direction taken by the woman sport.

Fortune seemed to favor him, for almost instantly he caught sight of the person he sought, lingering in the light which streamed through the windows of a saloon, as though debating whether or no to enter. But this hesitation only lasted a brief space; then Dandy Darling turned abruptly on her heel and strode away, Pistol Johnny cautiously dogging her.

The chase was not of long duration.

Ten minutes later Pistol Johnny saw the dainty figure enter a small, one-story building, situated some distance from any other house on the outskirts of the camp.

Stealthily he crept nearer, as the door closed behind the strange being in whom he appeared to take so much interest, but for a few minutes there seemed but little chance of his reaping any reward for his pains. But then his eyes began to glisten as a faint light suddenly showed through a window, and on tiptoe, making not the slightest sound to betray his espial, he glided up to the beacon, only to shut his teeth in a grim fashion as he saw that the close-drawn curtain prevented his obtaining the slightest view of the interior.

From a corner of his eye Pistol Johnny suddenly caught a glimpse of a slender ray of light streaming out through the darkness, and turning quickly in that direction he discovered a small, star-shaped hole in the door, about on a level with his eyes, by means of which it seemed as though he might obtain the coveted view of the interior.

Silently stealing along, he set foot upon the stone door-step before the door, when that barrier suddenly flew open, and with a light laugh, a mocking bow, the woman sport spoke:

"Good-evening, Pistol Johnny! Will you walk inside?"

For once in his life the cool sport was thoroughly taken aback and at a loss how to act. Unwomanly though her conduct thus far had been, he could not wholly forget that she was one of the gentler sex, and his face flushed hotly at having been discovered in espial.

Again that mocking laugh, now with the sting even less disguised than at first.

"Surely you are not afraid, my dear friend?"

"Well I may be," was the slow response, as Pistol Johnny regained a portion of his wonted coolness. "Woman has proved mighty bad medicine to me thus far in life!"

"Yet you took the pains to follow me home!"

"For which I had my reasons."

"And which I trust you will make clear to me," was the swift interjection. "I shall be most happy to hear them. Once more, I beg of you—please enter!"

Pistol Johnny took off his hat and stepped across the threshold, as the woman sport made way for him. She closed the door quickly behind him, and as it shut with a peculiar, sharp click, a keen light flashed into the steel-gray eyes of the cool sport as they swiftly glanced around him, for he knew that the door was held firm by a spring lock.

Dandy Darling—still to use the name which the strange woman elected while in her masculine garb—brushed past him with a bright smile, then confronted him as though about to speak. Instead—the floor suddenly gave way beneath him, and an involuntary cry burst from his lips as he felt himself falling.

Instinctively Pistol Johnny flung out both arms in the effort to grasp some support, but in vain; the death-trap was too cunningly contrived for that. And yet, he did not fall far.

Just before his face passed the level of the floor, the trap closed around his body, checking his further descent for the time being, holding him like a vise directly below his armpits, his hands resting on the floor beyond the basin-like depression thus formed.

"How much will you take for your bet, now, Pistol Johnny?"

CHAPTER X.

THE "BUG" AND ITS STING.

Not all of Tight Squeeze had congregated before the door of the Grand Central Hotel to witness the arrival of belated Tansy Dick with

his "mixed cargo" of life and death, nor did the sharp crack of Dandy Darling's revolver, promising a "free circus" though it did, prove sufficient to break up a certain "little game" which was then in course of progress.

"Dandy's Den," one of the places containing a couple of faro outfits which the woman sport boasted of owning or controlling, was the choice resort of the card-playing fraternity of Tight Squeeze, whenever "well heeled" with the *oro*, for it was the only place in camp where the opportunity for betting was practically unlimited, and where one might feel sure that whatever the sum he cared to place, it would be covered without a question or pause for consultation.

In addition to the two faro lay-outs, there were conveniences for those who preferred to indulge in short-card playing, at the rear end of the long, rough building, where, though not entirely shut off from the faro department, comparative privacy was afforded.

The building was long and low, of but one story in height, with little pretense at architectural grace or symmetry. In front was a bar, facing the entrance and extending nearly the entire width of the house, leaving only a narrow passage by means of which admittance could be gained to the gambling department. This passage was generally guarded by one or two burly roughs, not because there was any fear of a descent of police—since Tight Squeeze made out to "run herself," after a fashion—but to keep out all those who were too full of bad whisky or fighting-wind, whose antics might disturb the regular players and patrons of the tables.

The gambling-room itself was plainly furnished. The faro-tables were provided with chairs for the dealers, but stout benches, firmly fastened to the floor, served to accommodate the players.

White cotton cloth alone concealed the rough timbers of which the sides were composed, as well as the rafters above. Three rude and "home-made" chandeliers served as light bearers, but at present only one of these, that which illuminated the end of the long room, was lighted, for as yet the faro tables were unoccupied, the night being too young.

At a small round-topped table close to the rear end of the apartment, two men were playing poker, and it needed but a single glance at the goodly pile of gold and bank-notes between them to see that their game was a more than ordinarily heavy one.

With but brief intervals, it had already lasted for two days and nights, and the present sitting began shortly before noon; but those who gathered around to witness the game, knew that the end was close at hand.

Until that sitting, luck had balanced about equally between the two players, first one winning a few deals, then the other holding the best hands, and it was this fact that caused the interest to run so high among the spectators, for the best-known of the two players, Thompson Hurd by name, bore the reputation of being the best short-card player in town, by long odds, and never until now had he encountered a man who could "hold him level" for so long a stretch.

His present adversary, Austin Burbanks, as he gave his name, was a comparative stranger in camp, having arrived less than a month previously; but during that time had made his mark in more respects than one.

He appeared to have plenty of money, and to be fond of sport in all of its phases. Though claiming to be on the lookout for good investments in mines, he passed by far the greater portion of his time at one or other of the gaming dens, playing a bold game at faro, and winning a considerable sum. Then Thompson Hurd threw out his tools, and those who knew the veterar poker-player shrugged their shoulders enviously as they predicted the rapid and scientific plucking of this rich pigeon.

Their surprise at the obstinate resistance made to this plucking process by young Burbanks, though great, could not be compared with that felt by Hurd himself. Confident in his own great skill and general good luck, he had not made use of any tool means to hasten the fleecing of his adversary, influenced in some degree, it may be, by the blunt declaration of Burbanks when their single-handed tilt began, that any attempt at crooked work would be the signal for pistol-play.

But now the end was close at hand, and the deeply interested spectators drew a long breath as Burbanks, pale as death itself, dropped a small roll of bank-notes on the pile of money between them, muttering hoarsely:

"I'd raise you, but I've struck bed-rock, and can't squeeze out another case. What have you been betting on?"

With his closed cards still guarded from observation by one hand, Hurd leisurely counted the sum last staked, as though doubting its correctness. Burbanks flushed hotly; then his face turned paler than before as he cried:

"Show down or give up the pot! No monkeying now!"

"I never give up," retorted Hurd, showing his teeth in an ugly smile, that vaguely reminded one of a hungry wolf, as with a swift motion

he "spread" his hand, revealing four kings with a small spot-card at the tail.

The young gambler stared at them for a brief space, then dropped his own hand on the deck, picking up the face cards and adding them to the stock before speaking.

The spectators drew a long breath, as they witnessed this mute admission of defeat, and quick glances of admiration for the nerve displayed by the ruined gambler passed between them, as Hurd raked down the stakes with a coarse laugh.

"One thing, young man, you can boast of. I never met your equal for a tough fighter on a small capital. With a little more experience you'd give even the old man all he wanted to do to come out ahead of the game!"

With a sudden flushing of his pale face, Burbanks slapped the deck on the table, leaning forward and saying hoarsely:

"When we started, I had a trifle over thirty thousand. You have won it all, and I've not a dollar left to my name. A man might better be dead than in a place like this without money. Give me one more chance. I'll stake my life against one thousand dollars. If I win, I'll pull up stakes for good. If I lose, I'll swallow a bullet and call it square. Speak out! Do you take it up?"

"Do you take me for a John-donkey?" was the sharp, brutal retort. "I put up my good money against yours, dollar for dollar. If you'd come out ahead, I'd never have squealed."

"Then you refuse?"

"Of course I do. I don't mind giving you a stake to set you on your pins again, but not a fortune. If I were ass enough to accept, and you won, you'd only blow the money into the faro bank or some other's man's pocket. If I won—bah!" with a coarse, grating laugh. "There's no call for soap-grease here, and I don't keep a dog. If I did, I could get fresh meat for him a heap cheaper than you offer. Take that, and we'll talk more when your brain gets cooled off," he added, carelessly tossing a twenty-dollar bill across the table.

"I don't want to break your heart, nor yet send you to the poor-house," calmly retorted Burbanks, pushing back the bill and rising from his seat. "Good-evening, gentlemen. I've had my little fling, and am not going to squeal because I had to pay the piper. I'm only sorry that I didn't pick out a white man to make my heir!"

Hurd laughed carelessly as he stowed away his winnings.

"Come again, sonny, when you make another stake, and I'll give you your revenge. I'm always open for business, and I carry a National bank that says I can just lay clean over the heap when it comes down to poker!"

"When I'm out of town, you mean," interposed a clear, cold and incisive voice, as a medium-sized man in plain gray clothing stepped forward and tapped his knuckles on the table.

Thompson Hurd glanced up with an evil light in his red-tinged eyes, and his thin lips parted from his white teeth as he recognized the speaker.

"Who told you to chip in, Dave Pendy?"

"My own sweet will, old man," was the calm retort. "You crow too loud for a dung-hill cock when there's game stock around."

"What do you mean by that? Are you hunting a row?"

"If so, I'd look elsewhere for a partner, or the boys would all swear I was crazy-drunk. You lay claim to being the boss poker-player of this burg. I doubt that, and don't believe you have any money that says so."

"In other words, you think I'm worn out by this long tussle, and so brought down to your own level!" sneered Hurd, his evil eyes glittering with the anger which he could not entirely suppress.

"Not a bit of it. I think you haven't the sand to meet a professional on equal terms. You've got the science of skinning a tenderfoot down to a mighty fine point, and—"

"You're not a tenderfoot?"

"Well, hardly!"

"Good enough! Now look here. Money talks—"

"Tie up your chin and give the *oro* a chance, then!"

"I will—and you, too, Dave Pendy!"

"Penny *ante*, and a nickel limit, I suppose?"

"If those figures suit you best," with a sneer. "You ought to know your own caliber best. I'm not particular."

"Shall I give you my idea of a genteel game?"

"Genteel is good! Go on; I'm all ears."

"A self-evident fact, which none who know you will be inclined to doubt," laughed the cool gambler.

Hurd scowled savagely as a general laugh followed this keen cut, for he was by no means as popular among the crowd as Dave Pendy; but he was shrewd enough to see that he was losing ground in this battle of tongues, and he spoke sharply:

"Set your figures, and I'll meet them, never fear."

"That's business!" and Pendy dropped into the

chair vacated by Burbanks. "Draw poker, one thousand *ante*, without limit, save that no bet of less than a thousand cases shall go. Can you swallow that, old fellow?"

"And you into the bargain," was the grim response. "But let us understand one thing—when you go broke, you're not to come whining after a free stake, for I'm not in the cold meat business just at present."

"You do well to limit that assertion, old man, to the present. Perjury takes men to the chain-gang sometimes, they say," retorted Pendy, with a light yet meaning laugh.

Thompson Hurd grew ghastly pale for a moment, then his face flushed until it was fairly purple, as one hand dropped below the level of the table.

"What do you mean, curse you?" he grated.

"That you want to drop your grip on that six," sharply cried Pendy, his keen blue eyes glowing into those bloodshot orbs with the secret power of a wild-beast tamer. "You burn a grain of powder in that underhand fashion, and I'll have you swung up to dry before you can wink twice. You know me!"

While speaking these words he kept on shuffling the cards, making no move toward drawing a weapon, though all could see how accurately he had judged his antagonist.

Thompson Hurd held a revolver beneath the table, its muzzle pointing direct at the bowels of Dave Pendy, requiring only a muscular contraction of his finger on the trigger to lift and let fall the pointed hammer on the cartridge.

For one moment he seemed about to take the chances, but then the cool nerve displayed by his rival cowed him, and his hidden hand came out above the table as he snarled:

"Don't rub me too hard, Dave Pendy, or you'll sup sorrow one of these fine days!"

"I thought your taste ran to cloudy nights, instead?" with an uplifting of his brows in mock surprise. "But a truce to chaffing. After I've skinned you as you did our gentle friend Burbanks a bit since, we can resume this discussion, if your inclination holds out that long. If not—you won't be the first dung-hill that has drooped his tail feathers when he heard a pure game crow!"

The spectators interchanged swift glances and fell a little away from the table across which such biting compliments were flying, for they began to believe that all this was but a preliminary skirmish, with something more substantial to follow. Beyond a doubt, Dave Pendy was seeking a fight.

Apparently Thompson Hurd arrived at a different conclusion, for his anger disappeared as though by magic.

"You play a cunning hand, old boy, but I'm not a man to get rattled by blank cartridges. Get down to business!"

With a quiet smile, Dave Pendy pushed the cards across the table for the cut to decide the deal. Hurd took and swiftly shuffled them, then cut. Pendy cut, winning the deal.

From the very outset it was clear that the rival gamblers "meant business," yet neither showed anything like rash play, for with an *ante* so large, and the *taboo* placed on all small bets, neither of them could afford to throw away a single advantage.

For the first three or four hands, not a bet was made, not a card was drawn, but then came a change. The *ante* was made good, and cards discarded for fresh ones, the eager spectators crowding a little closer, for they felt that the struggle was now fairly begun.

Yet it was apparent that both of the players were acting coolly, for the bets did not range high, before Hurd "called," and in the "show," Dave Pendy took the "pot."

It is not necessary for our purpose, to give the result of each hand in detail; sufficient to say that for an hour or more, fortune seemed about evenly balanced between the two men, and at the end of that period, there was but little difference in the size of their piles, from the time when they first began play.

Fortunately for the interest of the already-wearied watchers—who had been kept for so long on the strain in the protracted game between Hurd and Burbanks, the crisis was not much longer delayed.

After the *ante* was seen and made good and cards discarded and draws made of fresh cards, Dave Pendy dropped five thousand dollars in bank-notes on the table, so spread out that a glance showed the amount of his wager—for the true poker-player wastes little breath, preferring to let his money "talk" instead, whenever that is possible.

Hurd, also according to the tacit rule among the more skillful of his craft, after once looking at his cards, placed them carefully face downward with their edges close to the verge of the table-top, a double-eagle placed upon them to guard against an accidental exposure. In silence he covered the wager of his opponent, then counted out ten thousand more, spreading the bills on the pot, then leaned back in his chair with his reddened eyes fixed craftily upon the cold, composed face of his adversary, awaiting his pleasure.

As well might he be staring at a waxen mask

as that impassible countenance, for all he could read there.

With his cards also secured from accidental exposure, Dave Pendy drew a fat wallet from his bosom, and deliberately extracting a pack-age of bills, counted out the ten thousand dollars and dropped them on the pile in the middle of the table. Still holding the remainder of the money in his hands, he cast a swift glance at his antagonist, and though Hurd instantly dropped his eyes, it was too late to prevent his cool adversary from noting the triumphant light which filled them.

"Little by jerks, and the fun will last longer," laughed Pendy, as he replaced the bills and stowed away his pocketbook. "I don't want to swallow you up at a single mouthful."

"If you want to call, why don't you say so?" growled Hurd with a malignant upward glance at his rival.

"Because my money speaks for me, and saves me that trouble," was the cool retort. "But if you will have it—I call."

With a dexterous motion, Hurd strung his hand on the table, displaying four ten-spots, with a trey at heel.

"No good!" quietly uttered Dave Pendy, and like magic his right hand clasping the butt of a revolver was planted firmly on the stakes, the muzzle staring Thompson Hurd in the face as he started back with a savage oath.

"No good, old man!" repeated Pendy, showing his white teeth. "I hold five aces, thirty-eight caliber!"

"I appeal to you, gentlemen!" hoarsely cried Hurd, turning a sickly pale hue as he shrunk away from the threatening muzzle. "All I ask is fair play—"

"And that you shall have, never fear," was the cool interjection. "All I'm kicking about is foul play! You've been playing the 'bug'* on me. If that 'bug' don't hold an ace, king, queen and knave, I'll put up my gun and give you the money."

Before Thompson Hurd could deny the accusation, Austin Burbanks slipped to his side, and reaching under the table, tore the "bug" from its place of concealment, revealing to all present the four cards named, together with a small one.

With a savage curse, the detected cheat struck the table with his knees, throwing it up against the face of Pendy, whose revolver exploded harmlessly, then drawing a knife, he drove it to the very hilt in the breast of poor Burbanks!

With a gasping groan, the murdered man reeled and fell as the crowd scattered, and Thompson Hurd turned and leaped headlong through the window which was cut through the end of the room, directly at his back.

A crash of glass, then the assassin was gone!

CHAPTER XI.

A TEST OF NERVE.

THERE are moments when the very bravest and coolest of men will be overtaken by a fear and dread of death, and it was an attack of this sort that came over Pistol Johnny as he felt that the floor giving way beneath him—when he felt that he was being hurled down to meet a dark and loathsome death without even the grim satisfaction of striking a blow in return. It was this that caused him to fling his arms out to their full extent and grip with desperation at the carpet which had served to conceal the cunning trap until it was too late for him to escape its merciless jaws. It was this that lent an additional power to his steel-like muscles and enabled him to support his weight with his hands alone and without the shock of his falling causing his rigid arms to bend—or so he imagined until he felt the sharp edges of the man-trap closing around his body with a power that at first seemed about to crush in his ribs and breast-bone.

But that period of weakness and terror was a brief one indeed. It came and went like a ray of light, short-lived as the very one by means of which he had been lured to the door of this house of secrets. And then Pistol Johnny was once more himself—cool, keen-witted, undaunted even when his life hung suspended by a gossamer thread.

No doubt he was aided in this recovery by the knowledge that his adroit trapper was watching his desperate struggles, standing there with folded arms, eyes glittering, laughing softly, the very personification of malicious triumph.

* "The Bug." A favorite tool in use among skin-gamblers for "holding out" cards. It may be briefly described as: An English awl with a smooth broad head on the butt, a piece of watch spring brazed to the side so as to run to the point and curl over. The point is pushed into the underside of the table exactly the width of a card from the edge, and the spring snaps up against the bottom of the table leaf. The player, having selected the cards he wishes, during the previous deals, slides it or them under the table between it and the elastic coil, which holds them firmly. When he receives one to match, or a pair or trio, he brings his hand of cards to the edge of the table, takes with his thumb the card from the "bug," slipping his discard in its place. One accustomed to the trick can play it on even a skilled and watchful adversary, with little fear of being detected in the act.

—THE AUTHOR.

With his arms still extended, but with naught in his composed countenance to denote the terrific strain which he was subjecting his muscles to in the endeavor to support the weight of his body by his palms alone, Pistol Johnny met the gaze of his enemy, steadily speaking:

"My enemies have sworn, more than once, that I weighed a ton; but really this begins to look like it. Daisy, Darling, you will have to engage a wood-butcher to look after the condition of your floors, before I call on you again."

The black eyes snapped with an angry fire and the white teeth showed over the red lip as the woman sport noted the peculiar division of her name by the steel-nerved captive, and there was something forced and unnatural in the laugh with which she made reply:

"Pleasant dreams be thine, Sir Jack o' the Double six! If you grow weary of this prospect before I return, just draw in your flippers and take a tumble to the lower regions. No doubt but what you'll receive a warm and welcome reception, and find many old-time friends waiting for you. *Adios!*"

Doffing hat, Dandy Darling bowed low to the helpless man, then turned away with a mocking, heartless laugh, disappearing from view through the hanging folds of curtain calico with which the walls of the little apartment were draped.

Not a muscle did Pistol Johnny move until his enemy had fairly vanished from sight, for he was doggedly resolved to lessen the triumph as much as possible; but as soon as the divided folds fell together again, he began cautiously feeling for a foothold, though it should prove ever so slight, in order to rest his terribly strained hands and arms.

With not a trace of the fierce struggle between hope and despair which was really going on below the surface, to be detected in his pale countenance, should Dandy Darling be concealed behind the drapery for the purpose of gloating over his hopeless fight against fate, Pistol Johnny worked his legs and the lower portion of his body around in every direction, but without finding the slightest support for his feet. Twice he made the circuit, then suffered his feet to drop down at full length, knowing that the effort was only hastening the end, which must come soon enough at the best.

True, the edges of the trap were pressing firmly against his person, but he did not for an instant believe that they could or were intended to keep him from falling down to whatever awaited him in the unknown depths below. He believed that they would yield to his weight the moment he relaxed his stiffened muscles, and though the man never lived who feared death as death less than he, Pistol Johnny was resolved to delay the complete triumph of his foe as long as possible.

The trap was a peculiar one, square and nearly five feet in diameter. When sprung by his weight or the touching of some hidden spring by Dandy Darling, a section of the flooring about one foot square seemed to drop from the center of the trap.

The remainder was cut into four equal sections, and now pressed tightly against the body of Pistol Johnny on both sides, rear and front, as though upheld by springs which would force the boards back into position the instant the captive fell through the opening and left it free to work.

The central opening, being less in diameter than the body of the entrapped man, a sort of shallow, basin-like depression was formed, bringing Pistol Johnny's chin about on a level with the solid portion of the floor, while the width of the trap was such that while his arms were extended at full length, his hands alone rested upon the firm flooring beyond the trap.

Thus far he had sustained his entire weight, as well as the heavy shock of his fall, by the stiffened muscles of his arms and wrists, his palms pressing on the carpet, but this could not last much longer. He had no support for his feet. The edges of the trap which clasped his body, sloped downward, and as a matter of course would give way beneath his weight the instant his arms should fail him.

All this Pistol Johnny took in at a single glance, but though he felt that his doom was sealed beyond all earthly hope, his indomitable "grit" would not permit him to yield one second sooner than nature compelled him.

"I'll hang on until I feel that I must go, then I'll take the pill so quick that she-devil won't have a chance to gloat over my despair!" he muttered to himself sternly.

Minute after minute fled after this terrible fashion, but through it all not a trace of emotion betrayed itself upon that pale, rigid countenance. If Dandy Darling was hidden behind the curtains, ready to exult over the impotent struggles of her victim, she would have little to reward her pains.

Molten metal instead of blood seemed to be coursing through the veins of his frightfully strained arms, and Pistol Johnny, feeling that he must soon succumb to that killing strain, and fearing lest in his growing weakness he give some sign of suffering which might betray his actual agony, silently breathed one short prayer then suddenly raised both arms above his head,

clasping his fingers tightly together the better to resist the temptation to make a futile grab at the edges of the trap when he fell.

A soft, merry laugh rung out upon his amazed hearing and a brilliant vision suddenly appeared before him as he remained supported by the spring-trap instead of being hurled down to meet a frightful death in the unknown depth below!

Pistol Johnny stared at the woman sport, then, as he realized the truth, for the first time his matchless nerve failed him, and he clasped his hands over his eyes. But only for a moment. Then they dropped, and his face was as calm and enigmatical as before.

"My dear Mr. Woodcock, did you for a moment imagine that I could be so utterly heartless as to doom you to death after that fashion?" cried—not Dandy, but Daisy Darling, as she sunk upon a couch which stood nearly opposite the entrapped sport.

"Not a bit of it, my dear lady," was the cool reply, as Pistol Johnny raised one hand to his lips to screen a yawn from view. "I was only invoking great Jupiter and begging him to send his lovely handmaiden to once more bless my hungry eyes—nothing more, I assure you."

"Well, you are a good one!" exclaimed the woman, her lustrous eyes filled with an admiration impossible to wholly conceal as she gazed fixedly upon the cool sport.

Pistol Johnny returned the gaze, with nearly equal interest; and little wonder.

By the mellow light of the twin lamps, Daisy Darling looked almost regally beautiful as she reclined with careless grace upon the couch.

The masculine garb had given place to clothing more befitting the feminine sex, and her trim, well-rounded figure was admirably displayed by the closely-fitting bodice of crimson velvet, the pointed bosom of which was filled with a cloud of delicate lace, amid which gleamed here and there a jewel. The trailing skirt of black satin was cut short in front, and as she half-reclined on the couch, revealed little slippers and white stocking feet. Diamonds and rubies gleamed amid her curling locks, and shone brightly on her white, rounded arms.

Her skin seemed softer, gently flushed; her eyes more brilliant; her lips a richer scarlet and her teeth whiter than when she figured as her "worse half," Dandy Darling.

"You are not the first lady who has kindly uttered some such sentiment as that concerning yours truly," lightly retorted Pistol Johnny; then abruptly adding: "Do you always receive your callers after this charming fashion?"

"Delightfully romantic, is it not?" with a merry laugh. "Too utterly too too, and exquisitely all but!"

"Think so?" dryly retorted Pistol Johnny. "From your position I should think it would look more like *all head*. But—as you say—no doubt you are entirely correct, though it is rather an enigmatical answer to my question."

"You are *sure* you are quite comfortable?" asked Daisy Darling, leaning forward with an anxious expression on her charming face.

"In paradise, I assure you! There is only one thing that could possibly increase my felicity, if I might dare—"

"It must be something terrible, that you don't dare!"

"Just the contrary. A thousand dictionaries, written out on an ocean of paper, couldn't begin to express the mere ghost of its intoxicating sweetness and utter delight!"

The black eyes glittered and a slight frown contracted the jetty brows, showing irritation at thus finding her mocking pretenses overmatched by the admirable nerve of her captive, and the soft voice grew hard as she demanded:

"What are you trying to get through you, anyhow?"

"Simply trying to imagine how delightful would be the change, were your fair arms substituted for these insensate boards, and hugging me with the same degree of tightness!" smiled Pistol Johnny, as the fair cheek nearest him flushed crimson.

"You honored me with a question a bit ago?" asked Daisy Darling, choosing to ignore this pointed speech.

"Which you apparently preferred not answering, so, like any other gentleman, I concluded it was best to change the subject. Forget my curiosity, I beg."

"Thanks; but I prefer satisfying it. No, I do not receive all my visitors after this fashion, though you are not the first spider that my charming little contrivance has caught."

"Why have I made you one of the exceptions? Partly because I wanted to show you that a woman, even in this wild and lawless region, can take care of herself if possessing wit and grit. And partly, too, to show you how foolish you were to enter into a wager for heavy stakes with one a complete stranger to you."

"What is there to hinder me from winning my bet, without running even the remotest chance of losing?" and as she spoke, Daisy Darling assumed a sitting posture, stretching out one daintily-slipped foot, holding it poised above a particular flower in the pattern of the carpet.

"A tap of my foot, barely heavy enough to

crush the life out of a spider, and the trap that hugs you so snugly now, would open its jaws and let you fall down to—what?

"You are suspended over the ruined shaft of an old mine. Who opened it, nobody knows. It was here before the first cabin was erected in Tight Squeeze—maybe long ages ago, for aught any person now living can tell.

"When pay-dirt was first struck here, the old shaft was prospected by the diggers, and from their narrow escape from death by foul gases which lurk at the bottom, came the odd name now given to this camp. Truly, it was a tight squeeze for the adventurous varlets!

"They learned sufficient, however, to estimate the depth of the shaft at near a hundred feet, and to swear that the fleshless bones of more than one human being lay at the bottom; then they covered the shaft over, and its existence was, in the bustle of events, completely forgotten.

"How I came to build directly over the shaft, does not concern you. Sufficient that I did so, and that I have found it a useful fact for me, on more than one occasion. It has served as a grave for men quite as dangerous, if not so gritty as you; it is quite capable of containing your remains, should I finally decide that it is best for my interests that you vanish forever from the sight of my fellow-citizens.

"What have you to say now?"

Rapidly, almost feverishly, the woman sport uttered these words, plainly perturbed by that cool, careless, yet admiring gaze. Her face was flushed, and her glowing eyes, keen and daring as they could prove themselves on occasion, drooped quickly as they strove to meet those of Pistol Johnny.

Quietly, yet with a certain degree of earnestness, he spoke in answer to her abrupt query:

"Only that if I must go under, I'll die with the face of an angel before my eyes!"

A hard, bitter laugh came from her lips.

"Bah! Do you think to buy me off with a few doses of such nauseating taffy?"

"I said the face of an angel," coolly retorted Pistol Johnny. "I never bet on a card that I can't see, so you'll excuse me for not spreading my dying confession over more ground."

Polite and respectful though the tones in which he uttered these words, they cut to the quick, for there could be no mistaking his covert meaning.

"Tell me your reasons for following and trying to spy on me?" sharply demanded Daisy Darling.

"Simply because I fell in love with you, at sight."

With a rapid motion, the woman sport produced a pistol and leveled it at his head, but the cool captive only showed his teeth in a mocking smile, as he said:

"Now you are growing foolish, my dear, or you'd never try to frighten a man with my name, by shoving a gun under his nose. Every night when I say my prayers, before retiring to my virtuous couch, I wind up with asking as a precious boon, that when my turn comes to cross the divide, I may have my ticket punched by just such an instrument as that. Swallowing lead is a much more comfortable idea than that of taking a preliminary trip toward Hades before the real journey begins!"

As though cowed by the wonderful nerve displayed even in the jaws of death, Daisy Darling dropped her weapon without discharging it.

"I ask your reasons for dogging me, and you give me taffy," she said, sourly. "You know you lied!"

"Well, I won't swear I didn't," with a provoking drawl. "I never could speak straight while in limbo."

"That's a polite hint for me to set you at liberty," sneered the woman sport. "Why not speak plainly?"

"I might, under other circumstances—say if you were rigged out in the clothes you wore when I first saw you, and were willing to take oath that you were of the sex they are supposed to represent. As it is—I never ask a favor of a woman," was the quiet response.

"Not even to save your life?"

"You could scarcely pick out a worse reason, my dear. Life is worth precious little to me, and if I could get rid of it without giving any one cause for crowing over my remains, I would not lift a finger to prolong it an hour."

"Why not call the turn yourself, then?"

"Because folks would hint around that I was afraid to live, and I don't fancy being branded with the name of a coward, even by my own hand."

"Good!" and the black eyes glittered with an evil light as the woman bent forward, her voice ringing out in malicious triumph. "At last I've found the weak joint in your armor, just as I was about to give over the search in despair, believing you absolutely without fear—a demon, rather than a common man. Now—listen!"

"You have not forgotten the terms in which I couched my challenge to you this evening? I said that you would either run away or be

killed by the chief of the road-agents, inside of a fortnight! I counted on the latter clause to save my stake and win yours, but now I'll claim the *oro* on the other!

"To morrow the citizens will be looking for the hero who tackled King Philip's gang single-handed and got the best of the deal. You will not be found then, nor ever! And before the two weeks are up, every man in camp will stand ready to take oath that you have *run away, cowed, and by a woman!*

"How do you like the picture, Pistol Johnny?"

"You forget one who will know you win through a lie."

"Who's that?" she sharply demanded.

"Your humble servant," with a brief bow.

"You'll never contradict the story, and that is all I care about. You will be branded, in memory at least, as a craven, and that will partially satisfy my spite against you."

"Not by those who know my record; for the rest, I care but little," was the cold retort.

"If that thought gives you satisfaction, hug it to your bosom," she laughed, spitefully.

"But I'll give you one more chance to save your bacon. Beg for your life—own up that I have broken your stiff backbone—and I will set you at liberty and trust to King Philip to win my bet for me. I'll give you five minutes in which to decide. If you refuse at the end of that time, I'll touch the spring that holds the trap, and send you down to death!"

Savagely she glared at him. Coldly he returned her gaze, and in the battle of will which followed, her nerve failed and her eyes dropped to the face of the watch which she held.

So silent they remained that the ticking of the watch was plainly perceptible, and then she looked for his yielding.

In vain: her foot fell, and with a click the trap opened!

CHAPTER XII.

A HAND FULL OF TRUMPS.

PISTOL JOHNNY saw that daintily-slipped foot fall upon the hidden spring, and instantly the four sections of the trap, which alone had supported his weight, yielded obedience to the touch and dropped away from his person, hanging by their hinges. He felt himself falling, but still that cold, almost sneering smile never changed its expression. He made no effort to check his descent by flinging out his arms as at first. They remained quietly folded across his chest, just as he placed them when Daisy Darling pronounced his death-doom. And his steel-gray eyes never moved from her pale countenance until they dropped below the level of the floor.

It was a superb exhibition of matchless "grit" in the face of what seemed inevitable death, for naught in words, tone or looks of the woman sport gave an inkling of what really followed the springing of the trap.

Less than two feet Pistol Johnny fell, his further descent being checked by an apparently fixed and solid platform of timbers. There instantly followed a sharp click, when the support beneath him shot suddenly upward, pausing as abruptly when only a few inches below the level of the floor.

Eagerly, breathlessly, Daisy Darling leaned forward and scanned the face of her captive by the light of the twin lamps as the cunningly-arranged mechanism brought him again within her visual range, but as she saw that cold smile unchanged in the slightest particular—as she encountered that half-scornful, half-pitying look in his eyes, she sunk back on the couch, pale as death, with a Spanish oath of mingled fear and admiration passing her lips.

"Man or devil!" she gasped, her voice sounding strained and unnatural. "Is there nothing that can move you? Are you armed at every point—proof against all fear?"

"Tolerably well beeled on that point," was the cool reply, as Pistol Johnny stepped leisurely from the platform to the solid flooring beyond. "Why not? A man who has nothing to live for in particular shouldn't be easily scared."

Even while speaking, he stooped as though curious to inspect the trap mechanism more critically than was possible from an erect position. With widely dilated eyes, the woman sport watched him, hoping to discover some sign that would tell her this supreme indifference was only assumed for the purpose of covering the powerful emotions which surely must have found birth in that crucial test of nerve; but once more she was forced to confess her hopes baffled. If acting a part in this, Pistol Johnny was letter-perfect.

Turning his face toward her, he spoke:

"Daisy, Darling, if you have no further use for this pretty little macaime, may I beg of you to touch those springs again? I can't exactly make out how the old thing works!"

Like one under the influence of a spell, she obeyed.

The platform smoothly dropped back to its former position, dimly visible by the light of the twin lamps. Another movement of the little foot, and the four sections of the trap rose with a clear click, closing so perfectly that

they appeared a portion of the solid flooring, leaving only a small aperture in the center.

Without the slightest hesitation or pause to test the stability of the trap as now seen, Pistol Johnny stepped forward and knelt down by the opening, giving a low grunt of satisfied curiosity as he touched the four triangular bits of board which hung on hinges, and only needed raising to a level to complete the closing of the ingeniously-arranged trap.

"That will do—much obliged," he said, rising and stepping from the trap. "I begin to see through it now. A very pretty little arrangement, 'pon my life! Did you invent it, Daisy, Darling?"

Again he slightly separated the name, as though challenging her to take offense at his audacity, but if he expected this, he was disappointed. The woman sport simply bowed.

"Indeed! You shud feel proud of the job, for it is a really admirable contrivance, and must often come into good play. If not impudent, might I ask how many silly flies you have caught in that cunning web?"

Perfectly respectful his tones, but there was something in his words, added to the peculiar look with which he awaited her answer, that caused the face of Daisy Darling to flush vividly and her black eyes to glitter with anger.

"What do you mean by that, John Woodcock?"

"Pardon—my tongue is so clumsy! I meant—how many little accidents have occurred since you first put this nice little toy into working order?"

"You are right; it is only an ornament," replied the woman sport, recovering her composure with an evident effort.

"Indeed? I fancied it was more for use than—"

"Do you mean to insult me, sir?" was the sharp, almost fierce interruption.

"Far from it, my dear madam," with a low, respectful bow. "I only imagined that possibly this might be one of the entrances to your private graveyard."

A low, mellow laugh broke from her lips as Daisy Darling sunk carelessly back on the couch, languidly motioning toward a chair not far away from her feet, as she spoke again:

"So you really swallowed all that 'wind' I gave you when you were posed for your picture, a bit ago? You took me for a modern Borgia, who substituted pitfalls for poison!"

"As a gentleman I am bound to believe whatever a lady tells me," quietly replied Pistol Johnny as he took the seat pointed out for him. "True, it was a rather large bolus to swallow, for—and I say it not in flattery, my dear madam—you more nearly resemble an angel than the devil you would have had me imagine. Still, you said it, and that made it the truth until you chose to contradict the assertion."

"Then, if I were to say that you are a very remarkable man—so extraordinary that I have tumbled over head and ears in love with you—my words would be regarded as gospel by you?" half laughed the woman sport.

"Of course—until I caught you whispering the same delightful tidings into another ear."

"You have little faith in the constancy of woman, then?"

A shrug of the shoulders, a gentle out-flinging of one hand, combined with a sneering smile, answered this query with far more clearness than words could have done.

"And you are not in love with me?" she persisted.

"If you say so, yes. If not, then I am spared the necessity of swearing to a lie."

"Really, you are complimentary!" with a little laugh.

"Do you think so, really?" with a gentle uplifting of his brows. "That is so kind of you! I really feared you would regard my unimpressibility as a personal slight, if not insult to your many charms; but now my heart beats freely again."

Once more, while no fault could be found with his words or the tone in which they were uttered, her face flushed hotly as she felt that adroitly concealed sting. An open insult would have been far less severely felt, because that might be given an answer in kind, while this afforded not the slightest available handle for retortment.

For a brief space there was silence, Pistol Johnny quietly watching her face as though awaiting her further pleasure, and she plainly debating some important point with herself.

Then she spoke, clearly, incisively:

"Bah! enough of this silly fencing—I'm tired of it! Drop your mask, Pistol Johnny, and I'll do the same. Let's get down to solid business!"

"All right, old girl—you hit me right where I live!" exclaimed the cool sport, stretching his arms and legs with a long, grunting yawn, then leaning back in his chair with his thumbs tucked under his armpits, the very picture of lazy, careless indifference. "It's been so long since I tried my hand at swapping lies and nonsense with a woman, that really I've got the cramp in my clapper, and feel as though I'd been feeding on sweetened wind for a month of Sundays!"

A more complete contrast to his former studied politeness and almost frigidly correct manner, could hardly be conceived. Daisy Darling stared at him for a brief space, in open-eyed astonishment, but then her eyes resumed their usual size, and a soft, amused laugh broke from her lips.

"Well, you are one of the boys, sure enough, my jolly Jack o' the Double Six! But I believe I like you better in this character than the other, admirable as that undoubtedly was."

"I dare say I might return the compliment with equal justice, if you would follow my example and throw off your disguise as completely," retorted Pistol Johnny.

"What do you mean by that?" with a dark frown.

"Paint is good—in its proper place, on a house. So is powder—in a gun. If you would take a good bath to soak off the mask that covers your own countenance; if you rubbed off the paint from your eyebrows and from beneath your eyes; if you shed a trifle of those company symmetricals, and cast aside your wig—you might not be quite so fascinating to the eye, but a man would better know what he was talking to."

"You are complimentary, I must say!"

"You proposed dropping all compliments, and now I'm taking you at your word, you begin to kick like a Government mule because I utter the naked truth! Woman all over!"

"You think I am painted, powdered, bewigged?" with a low laugh. "Some day you may discover how badly you are fooled."

"Not any in mine, thank you!" was the blunt retort. "I've had my fill of precious women, and it would take a daintier bait than any you have to offer, to bring back my appetite."

"Yet you took the pains to follow me here, and—"

"Drawn by curiosity, not by your charms—so-called," was the swift, almost brutal interruption.

If playing a part, Pistol Johnny seemed resolved not to fail through lack of plain speaking.

"I followed you here because you reminded me in face and form of a man whom I would give a trifle to meet, face to face. I fancied you might be a relative of some sort."

"Friend or foe?"

"An enemy, of course. A man like me has no friends."

"How did he wrong you? Why do you hate him?"

"I'll tell him that, when we meet—if ever!" was the low, savage response.

All lazy indifference was gone, now, from face, figure and voice. The steel-gray eyes blazed with an undying hatred. The strong white teeth came together with a vicious click. The square jaws were firmly set, and the small, sinewy hands clinched so tightly that it seemed as though the blood would burst from their finger-tips.

Daisy Darling gazed at him through her partly-closed lids, as though curiously studying him in this new phase. There was a brief period of silence, finally broken by the woman:

"If not a secret, may I ask the name of this person?"

Pistol Johnny threw out one hand with a hard laugh.

"I care not if the whole world knows I am hunting him. If death has not been before me, I'll come face to face with him before my life-trail ends, let him bide and skulk as he may. I wish I could feel that he knew I was on his track. He would suffer a little taste of vengeance!"

"If he knows anything of your character, I dare say that discovery would not make him sleep any sounder or have more agreeable dreams," said Daisy Darling, with a low laugh. "But, all the same, you forget to mention his name?"

"Solomon Abrandt."

"A Jewish gentleman, I judge?"

"Jew or Gentile, he's my meat if ever we meet in this world!" and as he savagely grated these words between his teeth, Pistol Johnny keenly scrutinized the fair face of the woman-sport, as though hoping to make some discovery there.

If so, he was doomed to disappointment. Calm and placid, nothing more than a languid curiosity was written there.

"I wish I could help you, but I hardly see how I can," she said, slowly. "I never heard that name before."

"It was the name he bore then, but he may have worn a score of others, since that time. Have you no relatives?"

"Not living. Of course I had parents, as the majority of us have, I believe; but I was an only child. A stray cousin or two, with the usual complement of uncles and aunts; but I can't remember that any of them resembled me very closely."

"But you spoke of my wearing a mask; possibly you would rest easier were I to prove myself a woman—"

"No, thank you!" interposed Pistol Johnny, with a sudden resumption of his careless, quizzical demeanor. "Not for the world, my dear

madam! I'm quite content to take your word for it—I am, *really!*"

Despite herself, Daisy Darling was forced to laugh at his wildly exaggerated terror, but it seemed a relief to both to leave that suddenly unburied vendetta, and the name of Solomon Abrandt was not again mentioned by either.

"In turn, I'll make a confession," said Daisy Darling, with a frankness that possessed a charm of its own. "Naturally, you must have wondered why I flung that bet in your face, this evening. Am I not right?"

"Because you thought King Philip a better man than yours truly, and didn't like to hear an absent friend belittled?"

"Not a bit of it, old fellow! I never saw King Philip, to my knowledge. I love him as little as you possibly can, and would spend as much money to bring him and all of his kind to a rope's end as the most law-loving citizen in Tight Squeeze. But I do know you, at least by reputation."

"I know that a more dangerous man never tackled the tiger which presides over a faro-table. I believed you came here to follow your profession, and that meant to buck against my good money, since I control all of the lay-outs in town."

"I bantered you to bet, with the express purpose of locking up a portion of your capital, as well as furnishing you work other than fighting my banks. If you won against such long odds—for there were friends if not members of the gang listening to your words right then and there—I would gain time to collect my forces, even though I lost my stake. If I won, and King Philip bagged you instead of getting worsted, I would be a thousand cases ahead and a dangerous antagonist be forever disposed of. See?"

"You reason like a Philadelphia lawyer, my dear!"

"And you hold no hard feelings against me for the little trick I played you?" she said, sweetly.

"I never waste a second thought on anything a woman may say or do," was the cold response. "If you drew any amusement from this little circus, you're entirely welcome to my share."

"You've got me there," with a short laugh as her face flushed. "I thought I would break down your boasted nerve—"

"Then I have a friend to sound my bugle?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said 'boasted nerve.' I never brag; consequently some person must have done so for me," was the quiet explanation.

"Actions speak louder than words, and rumor calls you a man absolutely without fear, and carrying a thousand pounds of pure grit to the square inch. I doubted it, and resolved to test your mettle; but I'm satisfied now. If I can't be your friend, I don't want to have you for an enemy. I'm no cock-tail, myself, and if we could only form a partnership—"

"Thanks; I'm not a marrying man!"

An angry flush rose to her temples as she stamped her foot sharply; but then her brows cleared, and she arose from the couch, saying:

"You are a tough nut, Jack o' the Double Six, and even a woman's tongue is no match for you. I had not the remotest intention of proposing a life partnership, for when I marry I'm going to wear the forked dry-goods. You would kick—"

"Most emphatically I would!"

"So we'll drop that subject. Will you drink a glass of wine with me, to our better acquaintance, before you go?"

"Thanks; I never drink—save out of my own private bottle," was the grave response, the gray eyes twinkling.

"Bah! you suspect me of foul play?"

"After your late experience? Never! To prove it—see!"

As he uttered these words, Pistol Johnny stepped upon the trap and stood in the center, with his arms folded, his back turned toward the woman. A touch of her foot would spring the trap, but he did not glance around or move until her little hand fell lightly upon his shoulder and she stood by his side with a half-mocking laugh as she said:

"Yet you never boast of your nerve, Johnny! But it is time you were going. Not that I want to drive you away, but if you show me many more of your charming traits, you'll tempt me to entrap you for good—if only to shut you up in a glass case as a curiosity!"

At a touch of her white hand, the door sprung open, and Pistol Johnny crossed the threshold, turning to say:

"Tell your friend King Philip that I'm after him with a sharp stick, and what I go for I generally get. As for you, Daisy, Darling, my parting advice is—hedge your bet!"

Without pausing for a reply, Pistol Johnny strode swiftly away toward the hotel, near which he had left his white mule.

But the exciting events of that night were not yet at an end, and before he had gained his destination, the muffled report of a pistol came to his ears, and swiftly following it the wild, fierce shouts that can bear but one interpretation when heard at such a time and in such a place.

It was the savage yell for human blood!

A thoroughbred sport from tip to toe, Pistol Johnny immediately turned toward the scene of disturbance, only to run almost against a bareheaded man who was swiftly fleeing from the scene of his fiendish crime.

Instantly divining the truth, as in the rear, not a hundred yards away, came the pursuit, Pistol Johnny caught the panting fugitive before he realized his danger, and with an adroit twist, cast him heavily to the ground.

They were where the bright light from a saloon windows revealed their forms, and when the capture was effected, a mad, bloodthirsty yell broke from the pursuers. On they rushed, brandishing their weapons, and beyond a doubt the panting murderer would have been literally torn to pieces, only for the bold front of Pistol Johnny, who stood with one foot holding Thompson Hurd face downward, a cocked revolver in each hand as he cried sharply to the avengers:

"Go slow, you! I hold a hand full of trumps, and I'll play them for all they're worth, if you crowd me too close!"

CHAPTER XIII.

PISTOL JOHNNY ARGUES THE POINT.

As though a stone wall had suddenly risen between them and their victim, the crowd came to a pause when that clear, warning tone challenged them. But it was more through sheer amazement that any one man should dare interfere to protect the red-handed assassin from their just vengeance, than from any fear of his leveled weapons.

Still, it was a point gained, let the cause be what it might, and Pistol Johnny promptly took advantage of it.

"Keep your clothes on, gentlemen, and don't get in too big a rush. The world won't come to an end before morning, and that gives us the whole night in which to talk this little matter over. What seems to be the row?"

"It's a row that'll scorch your fingers heap big if you don't keep 'em out of it!"

"The p'izen rattler stuck a man in the Den!"

"Take keer that we don't make the same rope do fer ye both! Down with your pops an' cl'ar the track!"

"It's all a plant to git Hurd off!"

"Jump in an' take 'em both! Now—all together!"

In swift succession came these cries, but instead of flinching or showing signs of uneasiness at the size of the contract which he so suddenly found on his hands, Pistol Johnny coolly confronted the crowd, weapons at a level and fingers on the triggers, a slight smile curling his lips as he saw that these fierce and bloodthirsty yells came from those whose precious carcasses were well shielded by others in front. Yet he knew, too, that a single false step might easily prove his destruction.

"Soft and easy, gentlemen! You wouldn't run over a friend without giving him time to step out of the way, would you?"

"Slide out of it, then, and don't waste time or breath in trying to shield a murderer!" cried a stern voice.

"Meaning this fellow who's playing footstool for yours truly?" calmly inquired Pistol Johnny, his voice as soft and smooth as newly-spun silk.

"Yes; be murdered a man back here!"

"And you all want to share with him the honor of being a cold-blooded assassin?" cried Pistol Johnny, his voice ringing out clear as a bell, full of contemptuous surprise. "He stabbed a man, you say. If he did so, without just cause or in defense of his own life, he deserves punishment for his sin; but if two-score of you jump on and tear him to pieces, without giving him a show for his life, how much cleaner will your hands show in the bright sunlight? If his are stained crimson, yours will show black as the lowest depths of hell itself in comparison!"

It called for nerve to utter words like these in the face of a mob whose worst passions were already wrought up to the boiling pitch; but Pistol Johnny knew enough of wild life to feel sure that no half measures would succeed, and he took the chances with his eyes open.

The mob, constantly increasing in size as the moments flew by, seemed stunned by his swift, scorching denunciation. They stared at each other as though seeking a leader, and Pistol Johnny was too wise to allow them time for recovery.

"Those are words with the bark on, I admit; but when you come to look at the case in cool blood, you can't help admitting the truth and justice of what I say. If the murderer was still foot-free, and likely to make his escape, thus cheating justice, there would be both sense and reason in your killing him. But that isn't the case now. The poor devil is trapped as surely as though he stood beneath the limb of a tree, tied hand and foot, with the noose drawn close around his throat."

As Pistol Johnny uttered these words, a man pushed and elbowed his way through the close ranks of the puzzled mob, and confronted the self-constituted champion of the prostrate murderer, pistol in hand.

The new-comer was greeted with a chorus of cries and hasty exclamations, from those whom the nerve of Pistol Johnny held in check.

"Whooray! Dave's the lad to settle it all hunk!"

"It's his put, anyhow!"

"Say the word, ole man, an' we'll climb all over the little cuss ef he don't skin out in a hurry!"

It was indeed Dave Pendy, whose accusation of foul play on the part of Thompson Hurd was the indirect cause of poor Austin Burbanks meeting his death at the hands of the infuriated gambler.

It was through no lack of nerve that Dave Pendy did not occupy a prominent position in the pursuit of the murderer, but when Thompson Hurd so suddenly upset the table in the rear end of Dandy's Den, he also overturned his antagonist, and scattered the money for which they had been playing, all over the floor.

Dave Pendy was a thoroughbred gambler, accustomed to large losses, which he could bear with as much philosophy as the next man, but it was contrary to human nature to abandon that big "pot" to the tender mercies of sticky fingers while he joined in the chase. A glance showed him that pursuit was already instituted, and trusting to his mates to capture or kill the fugitive, he busied himself in collecting the scattered wealth.

This duty accomplished, he hastily followed, coming up as already noted, and at once pushing to the front.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded sharply, keenly scanning the gritty little sport, who still stood with leveled weapons, one foot planted between the broad shoulders of the murderer, who had been partially stunned by his heavy fall. "Is that bloodhound dead?"

"Not unless fright killed him," coolly replied Pistol Johnny; "and I reckon he's too tough a cat to go under from the effects of a dose of that medicine."

"Stand aside, then, and I'll end him!"

Pistol Johnny swiftly turned the muzzle of one pistol toward the stern speaker, sharply crying:

"Now I wouldn't, if I were you, my dear fellow!"

"What do you mean?" snarled Pendy, shrinking a trifle.

"Just this: and I'm giving it to you straight as a Virginia rail-fence! Only for me, this poor devil would have got away clear from you all. I took him prisoner, to answer to justice for his crimes, be they little or big. But I didn't nail him for you or any other man to butcher in cold blood."

"But you don't know what he's done!"

"I'll be wiser after you tell me," dryly.

"He was caught cheating at cards, and stabbed an unarmed lad to the heart, without word or warning!"

"For which he deserves to hang; and I'll not say one word against that sort of retribution. My motto is to let no guilty man escape. But at the same time, I'm dead against all mob law and lynching in hot blood."

Dave Pendy laughed, his tones hard and cutting.

"You're only one man against fifty. What can you do? If I say the word—if I but lift my finger as a signal—down you go, and salt couldn't save you from spoiling!"

"Thanks for the warning, my dear fellow," drawled Pistol Johnny, apparently unmoved by the prospect. "When your finger goes *up*, you go *down*, and I'll have good company over the range. Not that I mean to threaten, for then you'd feel bound to take up my dare; I simply throw out a hint."

Quietly, smoothly as he spoke, Dave Pendy knew that any attempt to crowd the gritty little sport would end in his own death, and he mentally cursed the eagerness which plunged him into this ugly dilemma. He hated to retreat, yet he dare not advance. If some one of his mates among the crowd would only come to his aid with a snap shot!

There seemed little prospect of this, however. Though a pretty general favorite in Tight Squeeze, Dave Pendy was somewhat inclined to assume the airs and dignity of "a chief," and even his most intimate cronies were quite willing to let him settle the affair as best he might, so long as they were satisfied that the assassin could not escape them entirely.

Hoping to catch Pistol Johnny off his guard, he said:

"If you act on that hint, it will be the last trigger you'll ever pull! If I can't bore you myself, some of the lads assuredly will!"

"Cold comfort for you, one would imagine," laughed Pistol Johnny lightly. "But let us hope that it won't come to that extremity, for really this poor devil don't look worth it."

"Then why do you insist on trying to cheat justice?"

"Begging your pardon for the correction, but I'm justice's right-bower, every time! If not, would I have taken the trouble to step in the way of this fellow when he was almost out of the fire? I knew he had committed some crime, and so I downed him that justice might have its rights."

"All the same, no man in whose capture I've a finger in, shall be killed without at least the ghost of a trial, while I have power to pick a trigger or play cold steel. If you're dead set on butchering him, you must crawl over me first—and I'm open to bet a few cents that one or two of the gang will get their tickets punched before they get through crawling over the conductor!"

"Oh, give him one right whar he lives, Dave!" cried a disgusted voice from the rear of the crowd.

"Don't be so mighty modest, mate, but come and scare me to death with a sight of your carcass, instead of trying to wither me with an empty gust of wind," laughed Pistol Johnny. "Our mutual friend, Dave, is a gentleman who knows how to listen to reason, and all the cowardly scout-firing you can do won't turn his stomach against the pure white article."

"Empty blustering is not argument," tartly retorted the gambler, plainly chafing as he vainly watched for an opening.

"I was only answering a fool according to his folly, but I'll come down to sober business now, if you are ready to listen to me," said Pistol Johnny, all trace of levity vanishing from both voice and manner.

Dave Pendy made no reply. In fact, he knew not what to say. He found himself in the front rank, with all the rest of his party plainly waiting for his action; but he was not ready to commit suicide, even for the sake of maintaining his reputation as "a mighty bad man to tackle!"

"I'll give it to you as short as I know how, gentlemen," added Pistol Johnny, speaking clearly and incisively. "I am almost sorry that I stuck a finger into this pie, now, but as I have, I'm going to divide it as fairly as I can. You're enough to chaw both of us up at a single mouthful, if you think your appetite demands such tough food, but little as I am, if you crowd me too close I'll manage to get a mouthful while you're making a square meal. So much for that."

"Act white, and treat me as a gentleman, and I pledge you my word that this man shall turn up for trial in the morning. Then, if he is found guilty of murder, as you now charge, hang him up to dry, if you can't find any better use for him. Be sure that I'll not say a word or lift a hand against your judgment being carried out."

"I had the honor of taking part in the capture of three of the gang of road-agents who train under the command of the precious scoundrel who calls himself King Philip—shades of the mighty sagamore! Kick a hole through the moldy crust that has held you down so long, tie up your creaking joints with a shoe-string, daub your grisly skull with lampblack, borrow old Powhatan's shillalah, and with a wild hou-la! go for the graceless scoundrel who stole a dead man's name to cover his dirty deeds of plunder and rapine!"

"Now's your chancce, Dave, to snatch him baldheaded while he's got the jumjams!" howled one of the crowd.

"Your pardon, gentlemen," laughed Pistol Johnny. "My natural indignation got a little the better of me, and led me into poetry—more or less. Let's return to our mutton."

"As I was saying, those three fellows are safely under guard, waiting for their trial in the morning. Put this man in the jug with them, and let him take his chance with the rest. One trial will serve for them all. Of course he will be found guilty, and equally of course he will be hung; but then you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have acted like white men and honest citizens, besides avenging the man he murdered."

"That's my platform. How do you like it?"

"Not a bit!" cried a huge, burly fellow, pressing forward from the heart of the crowd. "It's all some durned trick to git time to run the cussed murderer off!"

"Thank you, beauty!" cried Pistol Johnny, turning the muzzle of his second pistol full upon the speaker. "I have been at a loss for a target, but I've got one now. When the band begins to play, you'll be the first hound to chaw lead!"

Big as he was, something in those cold, stern tones seemed to cow the ruffian, for instead of replying, he visibly cowered for a moment, then suddenly stooped down behind his nearest neighbors and hastily worked his way out of range of that menacing weapon.

"Any more of you want to put in a suggestion?" cried the gritty little sport, his steel-gray eyes flitting ominously as they roved swiftly around the crowd. "If so, don't be at all backward in coming forward. It's a free country, and every man owns his tongue. Let it wag, if you think you've got anything of importance to say!"

For a brief space there was perfect silence among the crowd, for all could see that the cool sport was growing dangerous. But then, suddenly popping up from an entirely different quarter from where he had vanished, the burly rascal gave a savage curse as he leveled a pistol and fired at Pistol Johnny! Like an echo came a second report, and with a horrible scream the would-be assassin fell heavily in his tracks!

CHAPTER XIV.

AND DANDY DARLING CHIPS IN.

"It's my night for a jamboree, gents, and I'm on it bigger'n a wolf! Teeth filed up for business, and a poison sac at the butt of each finger-nail! I'm an electric wire with the circuit closed, and if you're anxious to solve the great mystery of what lies over the divide, just touch me or my gallant pard, Honest Jack o' the Double Six!"

Sharp and clear rung out these words on the hearing of the startled crowd immediately after that double shot, when they were undecided whether to scatter in haste to avoid the flying lead which might be expected to follow, or overwhelm the gritty sport by one mad rush. And then a lithe, elegant figure pressed rapidly through the agitated mass, pausing shoulder to shoulder with Pistol Johnny, each hand clasping a ready revolver.

There could be no mistaking either face, figure or voice. All belonged to the woman sport of Tight Squeeze, again wearing the fanciful garb in which she claimed the name of Dandy Darling.

"For shame, men of Tight Squeeze!" she cried in a tone of withering contempt, as her black eyes flashed around the ranks as though looking for some particular face. "Three-score healthy men pouncing on a single gentleman! Is this your notion of fair play and the clean, white article?"

"He shot Turk Ziph just now!"

"Don't you begin to lie, Dave Pendy!" swiftly interjected Dandy, turning upon the gambler. "I laid Big Turk out myself, for I caught sight of him taking a pot-shot at Pistol Johnny from under cover. I make no apologies for killing the dirty cur. I would do it over again under the same circumstances, for a coward is worse than a horse-thief, and none but the very lowest of dung-hills would steal the drop after that fashion."

"What's the matter here, anyhow? If Pistol Johnny has trod on your toes by any chance, I'm open to bet that he will agree to give you full satisfaction, man to man, or give you the odds up to half a dozen, for that matter—but you can't pile a thousand onto one while I'm in the ring!"

"Of course, if you interfere for him, we've got to take water," sullenly muttered the gambler, his face white as chalk, and his eyes filled with an ugly light as they turned upon the gritty little sport.

"Water is a heap healthier than lead, as a steady diet, my dear David," laughed Dandy Darling, lowering her weapons and easing down the hammers with the air of one who feels that all danger is past for the time being. "And I'm a false prophet if you ever before came so near getting a full meal of that very mineral than when I shoved in my little oar, just now! You meant business, Jacky?"

"Not unless I was crowded too close for comfort," was the cool response. "I was shaking in my boots all the time for fear some of these gentlemen would call my little bluff."

"Big Turk Ziph came precious nigh doing it!"

With a low, careless laugh, Pistol Johnny put up his tools and then ran his left hand through his curling locks where the lead of the desperado had cut a passage. Bowing low, he extended the severed curl to Dandy Darling, saying:

"Will you do me the honor? Good for rats, and warranted to kill at a thousand yards!"

The face of the woman sport turned a vivid crimson, then as suddenly paled, as she wheeled abruptly and spoke to Dave Pendy, who stood watching them in sullen silence:

"It's clear you terrible creatures have frightened our meek and gentle friend half out of his wits. How did you do it, and what's this row about, anyhow?"

"Tom Hurd stabbed a lad who exposed his cheating at cards, then made a break for it. That fellow tried to choke us off when we run the murderer down. Only for you, they both would be cold meat by now," was the sullen reply.

"What have you to say, Pistol Johnny?"

"Not much. A man run into my arms, and as a lot of others were chasing him, I invited him to take a little rest until the matter could be explained. We were just arguing the case together when you chipped in."

"You don't want to shield a murderer from the consequences due his crime, surely!"

"Not a bit of it! The point I made was this: Only for my interference this poor devil would have cleared town and given his pursuers the slip in the darkness among the rocks, dead sure. I stopped him, and these gentlemen insisted on stringing him up to dry, off-hand. That was what I objected to, and I told them then, what I repeat now: no man in whose capture I've had a hand, shall ever be lynched like a dog, without even the ghost of a trial, while I can pick trigger or handle cold steel."

"As a new-comer, you may be ignorant of the fact that we have no law courts in Tight Squeeze," commented Dandy.

"I ask no better judge and jury than this same crowd," quickly replied Pistol Johnny,

with a comprehensive wave of his hand. "I know that they will deal out justice after a square, white fashion, when they have had a chance to cool down a little. That is why I asked them to keep this man prisoner until morning, then inquire into his case at the same time they try the road-agents. I offered to pledge my word that he should appear at that time, but the overgrown brute whom you so kindly salivated for all he was worth, flung out an insinuation that I was only trying to play dirt on these gents."

"There may be some in the crowd who still hold to that silly notion, and for their sake, I say this: Give the poor devil until morning to make his peace with Heaven, and I pledge my word that he shall appear when you call him for trial, or else I'll take his place and assume all his responsibilities. Can I say fairer, gentlemen?"

"One moment before you give in your verdict, men of Tight Squeeze!" cried Dandy Darling, her voice ringing out clear and distinct, filled with a resolution which none within its compass could for a moment doubt. "I claim this gentleman as my particular friend. He is white, clean through. What he says, you can safely bank on without fear of going broke. And whoever tries to crowd him, treads on my toes. I reckon you are able to figure out just what that means."

"If they cain't, I'll hold up the blackboard while you do the sum to convince 'em!" cried bluff Tansy Dick, elbowing his way through the crowd and joining the two gritty sports. "You two're the team, an' I'm the brin'le bull dog under the waggin!" he added, with a grin, as he fingered his weapons.

Dave Pendy turned away without a word more, and as the crowd saw their leader abandon the contest, they also shifted front, raising their voices in a mighty cheer for their pet sport, who smilingly bowed her thanks.

"Thanks, gentlemen," she said, sweetly, glancing around. "I knew you only needed to have the matter placed squarely before you, in order to see it in the proper light. If Thompson Hurd is guilty of murder, he will be punished as surely as though you had lynched him out of hand, and you will have the satisfaction of feeling that you have performed your duty as honest citizens after a decent and orderly fashion."

All this transpired with an almost breathless rapidity, though so much space has been consumed in giving a correct description of the parts played by the more prominent actors, and until now the captured assassin had hardly given a sign of life or sensibility. When Pistol Johnny tripped him up, it was so that he fell head-first to the rocky ground, stunning him and nearly breaking his neck. But now, with a gasping groan, he struggled to rise and resume his flight.

Dandy Darling saw this, and at a word from her, Tansy Dick dropped on his knees beside the wretch and firmly bound his arms together behind his back.

Pistol Johnny removed his foot, and extended one hand to the woman sport, speaking with a half-laugh:

"And I owe you my thanks, Mr. Darling, if you will condescend to accept them. It is not every person who would take so much pains to insure the loss of a heavy wager!"

"You haven't bagged King Philip yet, Johnny lad, and I'm betting you won't do it in a hurry, smart as you are. All the same, I'll shake—put it thar!"

This ceremony duly performed, Pistol Johnny said:

"Now the question arises, where can I stow my noble captive for the rest of the night? As I've passed my word for his appearance in the morning, I don't care about running any longer chances than I have to."

"Thar's room a-plenty in the shack whar we've jugged the other critters, boss," replied Tansy Dick, rising from his task of binding the murderer. "I know the lads on guard won't object, an' ef we keep 'em trussed up snug, I don't reckon the pizen critters'll git to fightin' 'mongst themselves."

"Good enough, old man. I'll play jailer just for to-night, and so save the cost of a bed at the hotel. But first—I've got to provide for the comfort of my traveling companion."

As he uttered these words, Pistol Johnny thrust one crooked finger between his lips, and whistled sharply. Promptly there came a shrill *he-haw!* followed by the rapid clatter of hoofs, and then the white mule, Al Borak, came plunging through the laughing, roaring crowd, snapping viciously at those nearest to his line of passage, lashing out its heels at every stride until it came to an abrupt halt beside its master, the very picture of docile meekness as it rested its head over the shoulder of the cool sport.

In wild confusion the citizens scattered before the white tornado, tumbling over each other in their haste to clear a passage, greeted by roars of laughter from those who were not obliged to make such a sudden change of base, and that little incident completed the victory won by nervy advocates of law and order. A laughing crowd is seldom bloodthirsty.

Pistol Johnny returned the mute caress of his long-eared charger, then glanced around him before saying:

"Where's the poor but honest citizen who is not above making a stake by caring for a mule?"

A dozen voices were raised in eager response, but Pistol Johnny, seemingly without intention, was really making the selection with care, tossed a golden eagle so that it lodged in the ragged bosom of an old man, adding:

"You'll fill the bill, I reckon, daddy. Handle him with care, treat him like a man and a brother, for Al Borak is no common plug to chew shavings for hay or shoe-pegs for oats. Don't try to count the hairs in his brush or to carve your name on his rear battering-rams, and I reckon you won't quarrel very seriously. Good-night, my gentle gazelle! Sound sleep and pleasant dreams be thine!"

As though he comprehended every word spoken by his master, Al Borak made no resistance when the ragged old man took him by the halter to lead him away, looking as meek and innocent of mischief as an old sheep; but all the same the crowd quickly divided to give him plenty of room as he passed.

Tansy Dick had aided Thompson Hurd to rise to his feet, and for the first time Pistol Johnny caught a glimpse of the one in whose defense he had so boldly faced the desperate odds. But the headlong tumble had cut his face and covered it with blood and dirt until his own wife would hardly have recognized him without a second look, and Pistol Johnny certainly showed no signs of ever having met him before.

His left hand fell lightly upon the shoulder of his captive, and his voice was smooth as silk as he spoke:

"One word of warning, my good fellow. I'm going to take you to a place where you can pass the night in quiet, with ample opportunity for weighing your sins before being called upon to hop the twig for the benefit of society. There is a possible chance for you to cheat the rope, but if you make a break and try to escape while under my care, you'll find it means certain death. A word to the wise, and so-on. Now, Tansy, old pard, if you'll lead the way, we'll follow in your wake."

But Thompson Hurd made no effort to break away, for he knew that to do so would only hasten his death, for full one-half the crowd followed them, while Dandy Darling walked on the side opposite to that taken by Pistol Johnny, both carrying drawn and cocked revolvers.

The distance to the little shanty in which the three road-agents were stowed to await their trial in the morning, was quickly covered. The building stood on the edge of camp, with no other structure within a hundred yards of it.

As they drew near, a sharp challenge rung out, calling a halt, while on the night air there could be heard the significant *click click* of firearms being cocked; but Tansy Dick soon set the suspicions of the guards at rest, and the party came to a halt before the door.

Here Dandy Darling bade Pistol Johnny good-night, and, accompanied by the remainder of the citizens, took his leave, returning to the main part of the camp.

Tansy Dick led the way into the shanty, where the three outlaws lay on the floor, bound hand and foot, revealed in their masks and blouses which had not yet been taken from them, under the dim light of a smoking lamp.

As the light fell across the face of Pistol Johnny, Hurd gave a sudden start, and an involuntary cry escaped his lips as he visibly shrank away and turned his face quickly from the light, as though desirous of avoiding recognition. But if so, the very means he took to protect himself proved fatal to his hopes, for Pistol Johnny seemed to divine the truth, and with a swift exercise of strength, whirled him around until the blood-stained face was fully exposed.

For one moment he glared keenly into the battered countenance, then a savage snarl broke bissingly from his lips, and like some maddened wild beast, he gripped the trembling man by the throat, hurling him to the floor, falling upon him, growling:

"You—you devil! I've got you at last!"

CHAPTER XV.

SOME COBWEBS BRUSHED AWAY.

On parting with Pistol Johnny at the door of the little shack which had been selected to serve as a calaboose just for that night, Dandy Darling proceeded direct to the gambling-house in which poor Austin Burbanks had so suddenly met such a tragic death.

The citizens who had formed an escort for the captured murderer and his guards, bore her company, though not one among them all ventured to address or in any manner bring themselves too prominently before her.

Past experience told them that the pet sport of Tight Squeeze was "a mighty onsayin' animal," whose moods could shift more rapidly than the wind, blowing hot and cold in a single breath. And even in her mildest mood, when her temper seemed summer sunshine itself, clear as a Christian's conscience and tender as a maiden's sigh, no one could safely predict an hour's

peaceful calm. And still wiser the man who could say that his head was safe from injury when the storm should burst.

No other person in all the territory could have held so royal a sway over the "tough nuts" of Tight Squeeze. It was not alone that she occasionally laid claim to the name of woman—nowhere more tenderly prized or chivalrously honored than among the "wild and woolly" denizens of the untamed West, where other laws are a dead letter—and graciously appeared before them as Daisy Darling, in all the glory of silks and satins, laces and jewelry, seeming a veritable angel to the material eye. Or, as Dandy Darling, drinking, smoking, fingering the papers or picking a quarrel with some "tenderfoot" and scientifically "sinking a mineral shaft" through his anatomy, to the next day "plant" the remains with all the honors. It was not these traits alone that gave the pet sport such unlimited influence over the rougher element; but when coupled with an absolute ignorance of personal fear, with an audacity that apparently knew no bounds, with an open-handedness that shed gold on all sides, they proved irresistible.

And above all other considerations, Daisy Darling had neither husband nor favored lover, so far as the general public could ascertain, though, from the youngest "kid" to the oldest "buck" in all that region, all were more or less hopeful candidates for her royal favor.

But Daisy Darling apparently remained proof against the darts of Don Cupid, content with being king and queen by turns as the fancy guided her, and the love-sick swains could only nurse their unrequited passions and live in hopes of a more satisfactory state of affairs in the dim and misty future.

Straight to "Dandy's Den" went the pet sport of Tight Squeeze, finding it almost wholly deserted and both faro tables in idleness. Indeed, neither game had as yet been opened up for business, thanks to the tragic ending of that game of "draw" in the rear of the gambling hall.

Lying just as he fell on receiving that dastardly blow, the corpse of poor Austin Burbanks could be seen beside the overthrown table, weltering in the blood which had spurted from his severed arteries. On the ghastly, upturned face, so young and fair in life, rested a look of unutterable horror and bitter agony.

More than one stout-hearted man turned away with a shudder, sickened to the very core by that haunting look, but Dandy Darling betrayed no such weakness as she silently stood beside the corpse for a brief space, gazing down into the ghastly white face; and when she turned away, her voice was as clear and steady as though she had been viewing a sleeping friend.

"Truesdale, call a couple of your mates, and take charge of the remains. Plant them decently, and come to me for your pay. Make a note of whatever money or papers you find on the body, seal them up and keep them until they are called for."

In silence the man named carried out the brief orders, and as the body of the murdered youth was borne out of the room, the spectators silently made way, the majority uncovering their heads in honor of the dead.

Dandy Darling maintained silence until the grim procession disappeared from view, then, at a word from her, the two faro dealers took their seats and opened their banks for the regular transaction of business.

Little by little the room began to fill up, and within a half hour after the murdered man was carried across the threshold, the seats at each faro table were close crowded, the click of ivory checks and the clink of golden coins grew more constant, and the games were having full sway.

Here and there Dandy Darling glided, now nodding to one, then pausing to exchange a low word with a new-comer, but all the time watching the curtained archway as though awaiting the arrival of some particular person.

A quick glitter filled her eyes as Dave Pendy entered the ball, and she glided forward, brushing past him without a pause, but guardedly whispering:

"Follow me—I want to see you!"

Without a single glance backward, Dandy Darling left the Den, and proceeded straight to her house, but her confidence was not misplaced, for as she gained the threshold and turned the key in the lock, Dave Pendy stepped up beside her.

"You wanted me, and I'm here," he said, shortly.

"Come in," was the terse reply, as the woman sport opened the door and entered the building.

Dave Pendy obeyed, closing the door behind him and standing motionless while Dandy Darling struck a match and lit the twin lamps above her head. The light revealed an ugly scowl upon his face, and a still uglier glow in his blue eyes as they rested upon the handsome face of his companion.

If Dandy Darling noticed this, she gave no evidence of the fact, tossing aside her silk hat, dropping upon the couch and lazily watching the smoke that curled upward from the ashen tip of the cigar she was smoking.

For nearly a minute Dave Pendy stood looking at her, then his irritation proved more than he could control, and with an angry growl he spoke:

"Well! you've been playing the very devil, and a sweet old job you've made of it, too!"

"Is that so?" with a provoking drawl as she arched her delicately-penciled brows with an air of innocent surprise. "You are quite certain you know what you are talking about?"

"If I don't, it's a pity! Of all the fool-tricks—but you're a woman, and that accounts for it, I suppose," said the gambler, abruptly cutting his hasty speech short and dropping into a chair, moodily staring at the woman sport.

"Not while I wear the unmentionables, old fellow," with a short laugh. "I'm as good a man as the best of you, then."

"It's a pity you couldn't drop the fickle fancies with the clothes of your sex, so one might know how to take you for two minutes in succession! As it is now, a man who tries his level best to carry out your instructions, is sure of only one thing: that he'll get more kicks than halfpence, more curses than thanks from you! Any woman is hard enough master, but it would crack the brain of old Satan himself to keep the run of the cards, when you play the dealer!"

"Any more where that came from, Davy? Don't be bashful, but empty your budget for once and all!"

"Look at it yourself, and then say if it isn't enough to put a wire edge on a man's temper? What were your orders to me? To watch my chance and pin Thompson Hurd down to a big game, where the profit of winning would justify a less daring player than he in trying some hold-out game on me. You furnished the *oro* for me to splurge on, and I was to have unlimited credit at the banks if I needed any more. You said in particular, repeating the words over and over, that I was to give Hurd every chance to cheat, and then, when I could nail the proof, I was to do so. Of course a row would follow, when I was to shoot him down, if I could do it without making it look too much like a put-up job. If he wouldn't show fight sufficient to justify me in drilling him for keeps, he was to be run out of town, when you would see to the rest."

"And a pretty botch you made of it, too!" sharply interposed the woman sport, flinging aside her partly-smoked cigar and rising erect, her eyes flashing, her voice ringing with angry contempt.

"I can't see the botchwork until after you interfered," retorted Pendy, yet flinching a little from her burning look. "It was working right enough. I would have downed bo' th Hurd and that impudent cuss who calls himself Pistol Johnny, safe enough, only for your chipping in."

A low, mocking laugh broke from the red lips. "It looked like it! Any one could see that you were just on the point of pinning Pistol Johnny's ears back so you could swallow him alive without running the risk of having that tough morsel stick in your throat! Bah! Dave Pendy; good man as you call yourself, you bucked against your master then! You know that as well as I. You were white around the gills, and I could see you trembling in your boots as that gritty little pill laughed in your face—one man against fifty!"

There was too much of truth in this for the gambler to greatly relish or argue the point. Bitter enough would it have been at the best, but coming from those lips, the taunt was worse than a draught of gall.

"To hear you talk, one would almost believe you had fallen in love with this unknown upstart!" he growled savagely, gnawing at his blonde mustache, his blue eyes gleaming.

"Quien sabe?" murmured the woman sport, sinking back on the couch, a soft smile playing around her ripe lips, a half-laughing, half-serious light in her dark eyes. "I have committed greater follies than even that—have taken still longer chances and pulled them off, too! It might not be a bad speculation. Pistol Johnny and Daisy Darling—we could sweep the board clean and not half try!"

The face of Dave Pendy was a study as he sat there listening to the low, dreamy, murmuring tones of the strange, erratic being whom he loved with all the fervor of his sin stained nature. His face grew white as that of a corpse, and a shivering like that of one suffering from an ague chill, shook him from head to foot.

Yet he dared not give free vent to his emotions which came so near suffocating him, lest that very jealousy should tempt Daisy Darling to make a reality of this idle dream. As he said, she was a curious bundle of contradictions, and even those who apparently shared her intimate confidence, could never be certain of the mood in which they would find her, or how speedily it might change to the exact opposite.

But he could not sit there and watch that dreamy smile and far-away look, feeling as he did that they were born of her sudden fancy for this unknown sport, and as soon as he could command his voice to speak without too

plainly betraying his fierce jealousy, he uttered:

"A man would be a fool to cut his own throat when the next turn of the cards is sure to turn out in his favor. I knew I had the sport dead to rights, and with him out of the way, what was there to hinder the lads from stringing Tom Hurd up to dry? Nothing! And there he would be this very minute, only for your chipping in. What made you butcher Big Turk?"

"Because the clumsy rascal committed the same sin that you did—made a bungling botch of the job set for him," was the sharp retort, as the woman sport returned from dreamland.

"I heard the row, and took a walk to see what was in the wind. I came up just in time to see Turk Ziph slinging a blue whistler at Pistol Johnny from under cover of better men than himself. I saw that he had missed his aim, and to make sure that he would never 'blow the gaff,' I dropped him."

"One of the best and trustiest men in all the gang! The boss will raise a sweet old row when he finds it out!"

"I own no boss!" was the swift, impatient retort. "If King Philip gets up on his ear for a trifle like that, and comes cavorting around yours truly, the band will have the pleasure of electing a new head. What I've done, is done, and I'm ready to back it up with bullet or steel, woman though I be! Not even you can take me to task with impunity, Davy!"

Not much, surely; but as he heard the emphasis placed on that pronoun, the brow of the gambler grew clearer, and a softer light came into his eyes. Clear-witted, cool-nerved man of the world though he was under ordinary circumstances, Dave Pendy was led by a gossamer thread when this strange woman so willed.

But before he could speak, Dandy Darling "broke out in a new place," speaking sharply, hardly:

"Look you, Dave Pendy; I wish to thoroughly impress one point on your mind. Don't you ever go beyond orders, unless you grow weary and wish to break with me for good and all! Who set you on Pistol Johnny?"

Accustomed though he was to her abrupt changes, this sudden outburst, sharp and stern, took the gambler all aback, and it was not until Dandy Darling repeated the query that he managed to stammer:

"Why didn't you make a bet that he'd get killed—"

"A bet that I would far rather lose than win," was the swift interruption. "I made it as a promising speculation, at the time, but then I didn't fully realize the nature of the man. I took him for an ordinary ruffler, something of your own kidney, Davy, lad, who had made a ten-strike through blundering good luck. I mistook his talk for empty wind, and so flung a chip at him. I never expected him to take me at my offer, even if all that rumor whispered concerning his nerve and skill should prove Gospel truth. But he showed himself a thoroughbred then—and since—and now, as I hinted, I'd far rather lose my stake than win it."

"He can't win without killing or capturing the boss—"

"Who is quite old enough to take care of himself, especially as he has plain warning what to expect from Pistol Johnny. If not, that is his lookout, not mine."

"You're not going back on the boys?"

"That far, yes. But I was giving you a warning: Let Pistol Johnny alone, or one of you will get hurt, *sure!*"

"Is it *my* health, or *his*, that you are so anxious about?" demanded Pendy, the ugly light coming into his eyes again.

"Both," was the composed reply. "You are too useful a tool for me to lose, and as for Pistol Johnny—well, I think I would like him a great deal better as a benedict than a clammy corpse. Heigh-ho! if I don't jump over the broomstick pretty soon, folks will begin calling me an old maid!"

Dave Pendy looked up with a vicious glitter in his eyes.

"I thought it was the other fellow. You can't marry them both at the same time—not even you!"

"Two or a dozen—why not?" coolly retorted Dandy, with a wicked side-glance at her jealous lover. "If I choose to let the dam break, I've love enough to carry a thousand men beyond their depth, and tact sufficient to make each one ready to take oath that he and he alone is my divinity—my god!"

"And I suppose I am one of that thousand?"

"Really, I've not picked them all out. I might include you, perhaps, if you could manage to get rid of that ugly temper of yours. It is positively making you look old, Davy."

Paler than ever grew the gambler, and his voice was harsh and unnatural as he spoke impetuously:

"Daisy, you and I have got to come to a settlement sooner or later, and there's no time like the present. When am I to reap my reward?"

"When you have done something to deserve it!" was the swift, shrewish response. "Never, if you are to be constantly growling and snarling at my heels! Look out, Dave Pendy, that you don't make me sick and tired of you before your time! I have given you no pledge as yet—I'll never give you one until you have earned the right to claim me, or—"

With a sudden explosion of his pent-up rage, the gambler sprung to his feet, cutting her speech short.

"Look here, my lady! If you are simply using me as a convenient tool, to be cast aside when I can be of no further use to you, in favor of another, I'll get even—if I have to tear your false heart out and force it down the throat of your favored lover!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SHUT IN WITH A TIGER.

So sudden and savage was his attack, that Pistol Johnny had Thompson Hurd flat on the floor and half-strangled before Tansy Dick or any of his fellow-guards could lift a hand to rescue the prisoner. And when they did interfere, it was but with a half-hearted wish to succeed.

"'F I was you I wouldn't, mate," said Tansy Dick, coaxingly, as he clapped one hand on the nervous right arm of the infuriated sport. "Not that I keer a 'urn how soon the pizen critter pegs out, but it'd hev a kinder quar look ef you saved the laddy-buck from the rope, only to choke him to death with your own flippers—now *wouldn't* it, ole pard?"

Pistol Johnny recovered his self-control as swiftly as he lost it, and relaxing his death-grip, he sprung to his feet with a short, hard laugh that affected his hearers far more disagreeably than would have been the case had he hurled a volley of the fiercest curses at their heads.

"Your pardon, gentlemen, and many thanks for recalling me to my senses," he said, bowing low, his voice calm and even, as though the wild tempest of deadly hatred had never broken bounds. "I reckon I was out of my head for a bit—something like emotional insanity."

"You're mighty welcome to all we did," replied Tansy Dick, with a grin, as he clasped the proffered hand. "'Twasn't beca'se I hed so much love fer that pizen cuss, but somehow I couldn't make it look right to stan' by an' see you dirty your han's with him an' cheat the rope. Then the boys mought think you stood them off jest so you could hev all the fun o' punchin' his ticket to your own self—which'd look kinder sorter hoggish to them as didn't know no better!"

With a husky, rattling groan, Thompson Hurd stirred feebly and made an effort to rise, glaring bewilderedly around him with his bloodshot eyes, but shrinking back again as he saw and recognized the face of the man whom he had so bitterly injured in the days long gone by.

Something of that terrible look of deadly hatred came into the eyes of the gritty sport as he gazed down upon the bound wretch, and his voice was less even as he said:

"You are right, my friend. Being strangled by the hands of an honest man is too white a death for the eur, and I'm glad you kept me from cheating the hangman's rope out of its just dues. He richly merits such a death, on more accounts than one, as I will explain to you, some day."

"Lord love ye, mate!" exclaimed the driver, with an honest laugh. "I ain't snoopin' round fer to git at any o' your secruts. A rattler is a rattler, an' ef a white man tromps the life an' sting out o' ore, it's only a blame' fool that'd go axin' what fer be dcne it."

Pistol Johnny made no reply to this remark, his eyes settling on a rude slab door which marked the side of the little room directly opposite the front entrance.

"Where does that door lead to?" he asked, abruptly.

"The kitchen, I reckon. Thar is one, I believe."

"Just open it, will you?"

Tansy Dick obeyed, removing a stout bar from its brackets on each side of the door, flinging open the rude barrier, revealing a small shed kitchen of rough slabs, with hard-beaten ground floor, a rude fireplace and stone chimney in one corner, and a narrow door at the rear.

Pistol Johnny took in all this at a glance, then stooped and caught Thompson Hurd by the shoulders, dragging him across the room and thrusting him into the other room.

"I want to ask a little favor of you, old man," he spoke, turning to Tansy Dick once more. "As you see, that fellow and I are old acquaintances. I want to have a little private confab with him, on matters that only concern us two. Will you close and fasten this door behind us, and leave us alone for a few minutes?"

"Don't do it—he'll murder me!" cried the thoroughly terrified gambler. "My blood be upon your head if you do! I won't be left alone with him! I won't—curse you!"

Tansy Dick hesitated, eying Pistol Johnny with a growing doubt which was plainly impressed upon his bluff, honest face.

The blonde mustache curled with a cold sneer, and there was something of contempt in the

voice of Pistol Johnny as he unbuckled his belt of arms and dropped them at the feet of the stage-driver.

"Take charge of these playthings until I ask for them again. I give you my word that I have not another weapon anywhere about me."

Tansy Dick impulsively picked up the belt and cried:

"Ef I do I'm a hog! Putt on your riggin' ag'in, pard. I kin trust you—"

"But I can't trust myself," was the swift intimation as Pistol Johnny pushed the weapons aside resolutely. "I must have a private talk with that man before he dies by the rope; but I'm afraid to trust myself alone with him while a weapon is within easy reach of my hands. In a fit of passion I might slit his throat or blow his brains out, before I could stop my hand. Without them, the devil might tempt me to throttle the murderous dog, but you would hear the row in time to interfere and recall my senses."

"Durn the odds!" bluntly exclaimed one of the guards. "S'pose he does wipe him out? The boys'll hang the cuss ef he lives to see daylight ag'in; so what matter?"

"Tain't fer love o' Tom Hurd that I'm kickin', but I'd hate to see a white man like you dirty your han's."

"I will not. You have my word of honor. I will not lay the weight of a finger on the prisoner. I only ask an hour or so in which I can talk over the past with him."

"Which you kinhev, in course. But you'll take your tools back ag'in?"

"No; it will be safer not."

As he spoke Pistol Johnny stepped down into the shed, and Tansy Dick, after passing him one of the smoky lanterns, swung the slab-door to behind him and put up the bar.

Pistol Johnny placed the lantern where it would shed its dim light fairly upon the blood-stained countenance of the bound and prostrate assassin, then squatted down beside him, gazing fixedly into his face.

With a sullen yet frightened look, Thompson Hurd returned that steady gaze, something like an ague-chill running over his athletic frame.

Low, yet hard and stern, the voice of Pistol Johnny at length broke that ominous silence.

"S' we meet again, Ishmael Black! Do you remember how we parted the last time, ten long years ago?"

He paused, as though for an answer, but none came. The hunted look deepened in those blood-shot eyes, the strong frame shuddered still more plainly. More than ever the desperado resembled some savage wild beast, driven to a corner where it could neither take flight nor show fight.

Hard and bitter grated the laugh which broke from the lips of the little sport.

"You are wise to keep a curb on your tongue, Ishmael Black, for I find it a terrible temptation now—the devil keeps hissing in my ears and pointing to you, bidding me kill—bidding me tear the lying tongue from between your jaws—the tongue that coaxed away from me my one ewe lamb, and not content with that, lied me into a living hell!"

Pistol Johnny, as though afraid to trust himself, rose hastily and turned away from the cowering prisoner, standing with his face toward the blank wall, wrestling with his mad passions until he gained the victory. Not easily or soon. And when he turned again his face was white as that of a corpse, deep lined and haggard. His voice sounded unnatural, and that silent, terrible fight with himself appeared to have aged him more than the passage of a dozen years.

"I've sent the devil fleeing back home, Ishmael Black," he said, with a low, peculiar laugh, as he resumed his former position, squatting on his heels close beside the captive murderer, watching every change in the face before him.

It had once been remarkably handsome, if not too closely analyzed; even now, when at his best, the man whom Tight Squeeze only knew as Thompson Hurd, was one who would command attention in a crowd.

Over six feet in height, erect in figure, with a form that might have served a sculptor for a model; with curling locks of hair, once jetty black, but now thinly sprinkled with gray; with a heavy beard that fell nearly half-way to his waist, so carefully kept that it was plainly a source of pride to its owner; with well-made clothes to set off his physical attractions, Thompson Hurd, before unbridled passions and unlimited whisky began to get the upper hand of him, might have been a credit to any society, so far as education and personal appearance went.

But now, with his face all bruised and battered by the terrible fall which Pistol Johnny had given him; with his hair and beard tangled and matted; with his eyes red with blood, and his whole appearance that of one in abject fear of death, the gambler was anything but an agreeable object to look upon.

"I have put the temptation behind me, for I know that your hours are numbered," continued Pis'ol Johnny. "Your fate is already recorded,

and when the sun rises on the new day, your judges and your executioner will ask for you. I—the poor devil, the convict, the silly fool whom you so ruthlessly brushed aside from your path in those days of long ago—will deliver you up to their tender mercies! I swore to have vengeance, that day when we last stood face to face. I have lived on that vow ever since. I made it my guiding star in life, and never forgot it night or day. I can grasp my revenge now, and though it does not take the precise shape I have always pictured—though I thought to have killed you with my own hands—still, the draught will be none the less sweet!

"You, poor fool! feared to be locked in here with me alone, for your evil conscience made a coward of you, and you believed I would kill you like the cur the past has proved you to be. And so I might, only for having taken thought. You will suffer more to die on the gallows. You will suffer a thousand deaths between now and then, for your brute courage will fail you the more as the hour draws nearer, and the rope of the hangman will grow still more frightful!"

"It will be a double murder, then!" hoarsely muttered the prisoner, his eyes glowing with desperation. "The rope that shuts off my wind, will kill her, too!"

Pistol Johnny started convulsively, a blazing light filling his eyes. Twice he strove to speak, but his white teeth only clicked together without a syllable coming from his throat. Then, so hoarsely that it was with difficulty his speech could be understood, he muttered:

"Whom do you mean? Who will suffer with you?"

But Ishmael Black made no reply, his teeth coming together with a savage resolution, for he believed there was the ghost of a chance for him, even yet.

For a brief space Pistol Johnny waited for his answer, then a hard, ugly laugh broke from his lips:

"That cock won't fight, Ishmael Black! You can't cheat me as easily now as in the olden days when I was fool enough to believe in the friendship of man and the fidelity of woman!"

"The day was when I could have sworn you were the best and truest friend man ever owned—when I would have staked my life on the purity and truth of Marcia Ranney!"

"Come! the sight of your face tempts me to take a brief glance back at those days. I have often gone over them in my dreams, but you had less bitter cause to bear each detail in mind, and possibly the crimes you have committed since then may have wiped out some of those fond memories. Let me refresh your memory a bit, while waiting for the hangman."

"I was young then; rich, generous, confiding—in short, a poor, silly fool; for did I not trust you and her?"

"I was happy. I had a true friend. A lovely woman had sworn that I was the only man on earth for her. She swore that she loved me. She said she would be my wife, and the day was named on which I was to become the most blessed of men!"

"That day came, but instead of a bridegroom it found me a convict! Instead of a beautiful bride, I hugged to my bosom cold chains and iron manacles! Instead of my wedding notice, the newspapers teemed with sensational accounts of my conviction—told how I committed forgery, how I was detected in my crime by an honest man whose confidence I had so shamefully betrayed, yet whose damning evidence was so reluctantly given under compulsion of his sacred oath that each sentence seemed like a poisoned dagger driven deep into his own true heart!"

"So they wrote, and of you!"

"What were the actual facts? Those the papers never got hold of, or, if they did, cared not to spread them abroad."

"My honest friend had fallen in love with the true and pure woman who had sworn that she loved me alone. He dared not show his hand openly as my rival, and with devilish cunning he set a trap which caught me beyond the possibility of escape. He manufactured evidence that went to show me a base forger; he took care that his snare was perfect in all its details before he sprung it; and then, when I, stunned and like one under the influence of a frightful nightmare, was flung into prison, sentenced to six years' confinement at hard labor, my faithful friend married the woman who was my promised bride!"

"This is the true story which lay hidden under those highly-colored accounts of the sensation in high life."

"Well, I served out my time, and though I openly broke no rule or regulation, I earned the ill-will of my masters, who dubbed me a sullen, dangerous dog, and through their verdict I gained no commutation for good conduct."

"When the six years passed by I was released, to discover that I had no friends. You and Marcia Ranney had vanished, and though I hunted for you far and wide, year in and year out, I could find no trace of either until this very night. I swore to kill you when we met, but I also took another oath no less solemn. No matter now just what that oath was. I

may tell you soon, or you may die without ever hearing it."

"I ask you now, where is Marcia Ranney?"

"What do you want to know?" sullenly muttered Hurd.

"The truth. Lie to me, and you shall suffer still more."

The prisoner cast a covert glance toward his enemy, but as his eyes met that burning gaze, they drooped quickly.

"She's still living, and well," he growled.

"Where?" swiftly demanded Pistol Johnny, leaning forward.

The murderer closed his lips tightly; dogged silence being his only answer to this impetuous question.

Leaning forward, Pistol Johnny tapped him lightly on the shoulder with one finger, speaking deliberately:

"You may as well speak out, Ishmael Black. I will discover what I ask you without your aid, if I have to, and then you will reap no benefit from it. Speak out—but beware how you try to deceive me! If you lie, I will detect it. If you have abused her in any way, shape or manner, I will know it. If you have caused her to lead an unhappy life, I swear that I will hunt you down like a dog, and kill you by inches!"

"Bab!" snarled Hurd, showing his teeth savagely. "You talk as though I had a chance for life, when you know that I will be lynched, sure as the sun rises on to-morrow. One consolation, anyway—you can't blot out the past."

Before Pistol Johnny could make reply to this desperate taunt, a distant sound came to their ears, causing them both to start and catch their breath the better to listen. A sound that resembled the distant roar of a gathering tempest, deep and ominous, gaining in strength and distinctness with the passage of each moment. A sound that could never be mistaken for any other, by ears that had once rung with its terrible echoes—the yell for human blood!

"They're gathering to lynch me!" gasped Thompson Hurd, his voice hoarse and barely articulate, as he groveled there on the earthen floor, struggling vainly to burst the thongs which held his hands behind him. "They'll murder me! Set me free—hide me—I am not fit to die thus!"

And louder, plainer, grew the cry for blood.

CHAPTER XVII.

FEEDING A LOVER WITH HUSKS.

THE face of Dave Pendy was not an agreeable sight as he gave vent to that rather melodramatic speech, but it possessed at least the one merit of perfect sincerity. He fully meant every word that he uttered, for he was driven to desperation by the careless, bitter, repeated taunts of the woman sport.

Something urged him to leap upon her, and winding his sinewy fingers about her white throat, choke that mocking, jeering tongue into eternal silence, then turn the muzzle of a pistol to his own temples and forever put an end to that heart-sickening doubt.

Clearly as though he had put the terrible temptation into plain words, Dandy Darling read all this in his white, changing countenance and began to realize more clearly the real depths of this man's nature. Her cheeks paled a trifle and her muscles seemed to swell a little; but no other alteration in face or figure betrayed her knowledge until her glowing black eyes caught and fastened those of the maddened gambler.

Into that gaze the woman sport flung her whole power of mind and will, risking all on the cast—and won!

The savage light in the eyes of the gambler grew dimmer, and a little tinge of color came back to his cheeks; then his fierce gaze wavered, shifted, fell to the floor, and he stood before her, his strong frame weak and trembling.

She leaped to her feet and stood before him, shaking one white finger almost in his face as she spoke, her voice sharp and menacing, yet full of a careless contempt:

"You poor, snarling cur! How dare you address such words to me? What are you, to pretend to say what I shall or shall not do? By what right do you dare to dictate to me?"

Dave Pendy was no fool when not blinded by his mad passion for the being who used him as a tool and he still retained sense enough to know that if he yielded now, his servitude would be complete. He made one more effort to assert his manhood, though he dared not encounter that blazing gaze.

"The right of a man who loves you to utter desperation! The right which you gave me when you promised to become my wife!" he muttered, his voice hoarse and strained, the big veins starting out on his moistened temples.

"Stop right there!" cried Dandy Darling, tapping his bearded lips with the back of one hand, and laughing lightly as he staggered back from that dainty blow, as though a man had delivered it with a heavily-mailed fist. "Before you begin to prate about pledges, Dave Pendy, please remember that I have a verbal bond or two with your signature attached.

Have you quite forgotten how one of them ran? How you swore by all you held sacred and precious—my little paw, I believe it was, by the way!—that you would never breathe a word of love until I gave you permission? That you would serve me like a negro slave, silently, blindly, living on hope, asking no more substantial reward until it was my pleasure to take the seal from your lips and end your probation?"

"I know it," muttered the gambler, turning his eyes desperately until they encountered her scorching gaze. "But for all that, I'm a man, with the heart and blood of a man. I fully meant all I swore, but how can I help breaking that pledge when you laugh in my face and talk about marrying other men? I'd be lower than a dog if I could hear that, and still remain silent!"

"Then you can go your own way and forget that anything of the sort ever passed between us. I have no further use for you. The game I am playing to win is difficult enough without being made any heavier. I have no time or patience to waste in soothing a watchful, suspicious *aide*. Go your way, then, Dave Pendy, and I'll try and find a man who can really trust me—who will not shy and jump over the traces at every blank cartridge I may let off."

"Bid your new tool make his will before he enters your service, then!" savagely grated the desperate lover.

Dandy Darling gazed curiously into his face as she sunk back upon the couch once more, a smile curling her lip, a softer light coming into her black eyes.

"You would kill him, Davy, lad?"

"Try it and see, Daisy!" and as he spoke, the gambler fell upon his knees before her, his glowing eyes lighting up his pale countenance as though they were actually afire. "I know I am a fool for saying as much, after the way you have treated me, but I can't help it! You are the whole world to me. I was a man before I met you. I did not dream that any mortal being could so thoroughly humble me! I know that it will lower me still more in your estimation, but I can't give over all hope—the hope I have been allowed to cherish so long—of at last winning you for my own—my wife! See! on my knees I beg you to take back those words! Give me one more chance, and I'll try to keep my mad temper under better control, if you will only refrain from such bitter—"

"Easy, old fellow!" interposed the woman sport, with a warning shake of one white finger. "I am the one to impose conditions, not you. If I bid you eat dirt—order you to put your face in the dust and my foot upon your neck—"

The love-mad gambler literally obeyed, and a laugh of mocking triumph broke from the lips of Dandy Darling as her daintily-booted foot rested upon the neck of Dave Pendy.

Only for an instant; then she removed it, stooping and playfully patting the crimson cheek.

"Get up, you silly fellow, and don't lie there like a pet dog. It's a man I need, not a fawning poodle!"

"Yet you are not content until you have crushed every trace of manliness out of me," he muttered, rising and sinking once more into the chair.

"Because you were growing restive, Davy, and trying your hand at playing master before your term of slavery ended. I had to teach you a lesson, and I rather think I have done it. It rankles, now, but you will not be so likely to forget yourself again, and when your turn does come, you can reap a rich revenge."

"I'll be more merciful than you have shown yourself, Daisy," returned the gambler, with a forced smile. "My love is too great to suffer me to humble you as I have been humbled. I will be your slave then, even as I am now. At your lightest whim I will be ready to eat dirt, even as you made me but a bit ago. Only—"

"Conditions, Davy?"

"Not a condition, but an oath," he said, slowly. "If you ever learn to love another man better than you do me—if you give me the dirty shake after I have served my time—I'll kill you."

Even and steady his voice, but it conveyed more of conviction with it than when he raved the most wildly. It was an oath, and as she listened, as she looked into his stern, white face, the woman sport knew he would keep that oath at the cost of his own life, should she ever betray him and not slay at the same time.

A low, soft laugh parted her red lips as she said:

"I begin to believe you do love me, just a wee bit, Davy, lad, and if I were Daisy, instead of Dandy, I'd feel most awfully tempted to give you a smack—No, no!" she cried warningly as the love-mad gambler started from his chair. "It would be a high old joke, you kissing Dandy Darling! I'd never have the cheek to face the boys again, if I permitted that!"

With a sickly smile, Pendy resumed his seat.

"Is it always to be like this? Am I to be fed on nothing but husks?"

"I may kiss my master—never my slave!" was the swift, almost stern retort. "You re-

member the conditions: not a word of love—not a caress, even—until the game is won. You can afford to wait, if I am as dear to you as you say. The feast will seem all the more delicious when the dinner bell rings at last!"

"If you insist, so be it! But am I to work on in the dark? Could I not serve you better if I knew just what end you were seeking?"

"I bade you follow me here, for that very purpose," was the composed response. "You blundered terribly this evening, and it was partly because you failed to understand just what I was playing for. After to-night you will not have that excuse to offer for any botch-work."

"Tell me what to do, and if I fail, it will not be for the lack of earnestness or devotion on my part."

"It's a terribly mixed up affair, as it now stands, but I reckon you can see through the tangles if you give it your close attention," said Dandy Darling, lighting a fresh cigar and leaning back on the couch. "Don't interrupt me oftener than you can help, but if there is any point which you cannot thoroughly understand, check me, and I'll try to shed more light upon it."

"First, for Thompson Hurd. You remember how he came into possession of that mining claim—the one he calls Four Aces, after the hand which he won it with? But you don't know that Tom Hurd made a ten-strike there—that the claim he won so cheaply, bids fair to prove a second Bonanza. All the same it is a gospel fact.

"Felix Tiffany was lucky enough to get a half interest in the claim for a moderate sum, Hurd fancying that he had caught a sucker of the first water when he made the trade. But of that when we get a little further along.

"I set you at Tom Hurd, hoping you would get a chance to lay him out for good and all, when I would come forward as his heir to claim one-half interest in the mine. Well?" she asked abruptly, as Dave Pendy lifted one hand.

"You forget that he has a wife?"

"No; but she will never put forward her claims as his widow. Never mind how I know it; I'm giving it straight."

"You failed to wipe out your man, but he will never live to develop that mine. If he is not lynched before morning, he will surely then hang for killing young Burbanks. I will make my claim as his heir, or else present a document by which he conveyed me his interest in the mine for value received, just as the circumstances of the case favor."

"Felix Tiffany, thanks to the keen nose of Wilkinson, discovered what a bonanza he had struck in getting a share of that claim, and he tried to buy Hurd out. He chose his time poorly, or else let Tom see how deeply he was interested in getting hold of the entire claim, for the half-drunk rascal asked a stiff figure—no less than a cool twenty-five thousand—for his interest.

"Tiffany at once accepted his terms, but Hurd would not take anything but the cash down, and the old man hadn't that much with him. He offered a sight draft, but Hurd wouldn't have it. You know how ugly he can be when in liquor.

"Woody Wilkinson has been engaged to old Tiffany's only child for nearly a year, and it was understood between them that when the claim was once fairly secured, they were to take a trip back home, have the wedding celebrated, then return with money and means to fully develop the mine. This delightful programme was totally upset by the stubbornness of Hurd, and as Tiffany feared to leave the spot wholly unguarded, lest his partner should take it into his head to inspect the claim more carefully than he has as yet done, and discovering its actual value, double or treble his price, it was settled that Wilkinson should make the home trip alone, draw out the cash which Tiffany had on deposit, and hasten back, bringing the girl with him. And when they arrived, the wedding was to take place immediately.

"Unluckily for them, there were at least two others on the scent of the bonanza, and their carefully laid plans were discovered almost as soon as they were formed. I was one, the boss the other."

"You mean King Philip?"

"Handle that name tenderly, Davy, lad!" warned the woman sport. "There's no knowing what ears are spying, these days. I mean Arthur Cavendish." The gambler gave a sudden start of surprise and looked wonderingly into those black eyes. Dandy Darling laughed softly, then uttered in a low, guarded tone of voice:

"You may as well know all, though great pains have been taken to guard the secret of King Philip's identity. He and the black-bearded sport are one and the same. I needn't tell you to keep this to yourself. If you ever leaked, it would prove your last slip on this earth!"

"Cavendish and I made this discovery, and then, as the cheapest way to get the bonanza into our possession, he and I formed a neat little plot. He was all the more ready to enter into my views because, in the days gone by, he had

met this Tiffany girl and tried his level best to win her for a wife. Of course, the family had not the ghost of a suspicion that he was the notorious road-agent. He played his part to perfection, but it was no go. The girl loved Wilkinson, and gave him the mitten so decidedly that even his cheek could not carry on the game openly any longer.

"Well, we learned where Wilkinson was going, and how long he expected to be gone. We concluded to intercept him and his fair charge on the way back, pouch the money and run off with the lovers—for just what purpose you shall shortly see.

"Disguised as an old lawyer, calling myself Zerub Throop, I watched for them and took the same stage. Cavendish had some of his men on guard along the trail, besides others in ambush where the stage was to be stopped. I knew the points where they lay in hiding, and when we passed I was to give a signal to let them know the game was aboard, when they were to send up smoke signals to warn the others.

"Failure seemed an impossibility, so carefully had we arranged our plans; but for all that, everything went crooked.

"First the wife of Thompson Hurd stopped the hearse and warned us that the gang of King Philip was in waiting. She started to warn the girl, in particular, but I gave Jack Meaders, who was with me to help make sure of our prey, the office, and he frightened her off by swearing she was his crazy wife. She must have known and recognized him as one of the gang, for she fled in dismay, and I sent Jack after to silence her."

"Then Pistol Jack kicked up a rumpus—but you know the outcome of that little circus. I tried my best to wipe him out without actually showing my hand, but failed.

"While he was busy chaffing the citizens, I slipped out of the coach and changed my rig, to come back and fling a bet at him for the purpose of keeping his hands full so he would have no time to meddle further with our game."

"When I made that bet, I meant to win it by killing or having the gritty little fellow wiped out; but now, as I said before, I would rather lose than win!"

"May I ask why so?" slowly uttered the gambler-lover, controlling his voice only by a powerful effort.

"Because he is far too gritty to die like a dog. What a glorious team he and I would make!" exclaimed Dandy, with eyes fairly filled with fire.

"Perhaps you had better make him the offer!"

"I did, but he respectfully declined the honor."

Dave Pendy laughed incredulously; but beneath his forced composure it was easily seen that his mad jealousy was glowing, all the more fiercely because he felt obliged to hide it.

"It does sound rather rough, old fellow!" laughed the woman sport, throwing the end of her cigar across the room with a spiteful energy. "All the same, I'm giving it to you as straight as I know how. I made him the offer—maybe not in just so many words, but so plainly that he could not have mistaken my meaning—and I got the mitten! What you swear you are ready to die for, this Pistol Johnny coolly threw over his shoulder without so much as apologizing for his insensibility. And I could have hugged him for it, too!"

"You are not in earnest, of course," he muttered.

"There you are 'way off, Davy! I was in dead earnest. If he had taken me at my word, I'd have dropped the whole game—including you, my lad!—and together with him, have struck out for fresh pastures, to prove myself a model wife!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

DANDY DARLING WAXES CONFIDENTIAL.

DAVE PENDY turned white and red by turns, as he sat opposite the one woman whom this world contained for him, forced to listen to her impetuous speech, each word of which rankled in his heart like some poisoned barb. Earnest as she seemed, he could not believe she meant all she said. He fancied she was simply testing his powers of self-control, but even then it was like a sentence of death by torture for him to listen to her praises of another man.

Better for his peace of mind had he guarded his tell-tale countenance more carefully, for those keen, black eyes easily interpreted its varying expressions, and a short, scornful laugh parted the red lips as their owner resumed:

"Davy, lad, you'll never make better than a third rate card-player, as long as you publish your hand in your face after that fashion. Learn to wear a mask, man, as I do, or else turn honest and join the gospel-slingers."

"On any point but that—"

"If you shy so violently at the mere recital, what would you do bad the ungallant Jack o' the Double Six taken me at my word? Committed bloody murder—so your face reports. You must get over those squeamish notions of yours, my lad, or I shall be compelled to give you another lesson; and if I have to take that

trouble, I'll brand each letter so deep that the coming race, a thousand years from now, might read them on your skeleton if they had a fancy for such amusements."

"Why do you rub it in so bitterly, then?" muttered the gambler, sulkily. "You know it's in my blood. I can't help it coming to the surface, when you talk that way about other men, even when I know, as I know now, that it is nothing but wind."

"Wind, is it?" echoed Dandy Darling, with a short, hard laugh. "If it only was. But I'm giving it to you straight as a clothes line, my laddy-buck. I put that proposition before Pistol Johnny, only to have it flung over his shoulder, without so much as thank you, to sugar the bitter pill."

"You said he was a stranger—that you never saw him before this very evening?"

"True as Gospel; but it don't take long to get down to bed-rock when one is in sober earnest, and finds the right kind of soil to work in. Open your ears, and I'll confess.

"When I made that bet with Pistol Johnny, I felt sure that I would win it before the sun rose again, for I made the very natural mistake of taking him for an ordinary man.

"I talked enough to awaken his curiosity, and when I turned away, after putting up the *oro* in the hands of Tansy Dick, I felt pretty sure the little sport would follow my trail to learn more about me.

"I gave him the chance, stopping long enough in the light from the windows of Ted Huke's sporting drum for Pistol Johnny to strike my scent, then led him direct to this ranch. I slipped inside and struck a light, finally opening the little trap in the door yonder, watching for my gentle sucker to give a nibble. Then I opened the door and invited him inside."

"You asked him in here?" muttered Pandy, as she paused.

"I did, for a scandalous fact, Davy. But there was nothing for you to get jealous about—that far. I hadn't the remotest idea of making love to the little rascal—rather the contrary. I thought I would remove a dangerous snag from our channel, and when Pistol Johnny crossed the mark—you understand—I touched the spring and down he went!"

"But—I don't understand!" muttered Pandy. "If he went down the shaft, how did he escape? How came he out there to mix up in our little game against Tom Hurd?"

"Because I was a fool," came the deliberate response. "You must have heard some of the wild stories which circulate concerning this Pistol Johnny? He has the reputation of being one man in a thousand, so far as squareness and pure grit are concerned. They say you might as well tempt an angel fresh from heaven; and as for shaking his nerve—an earthquake couldn't begin to faze him!

"I was born skeptical, I reckon, and I took in these rumors with a big pinch of salt. I firmly intended to send Pistol Johnny through by express in the end, but I foolishly resolved to first shatter his vaunted nerve and make him beg for his life, like any common man. And right there is where I slipped up on it, *bad!*

"You know how the trap works ordinarily, but there's one little peculiarity about it which I have never taken the trouble to explain to you. By touching another spring, I can stop a falling man just as his head gets level with the floor, holding him there without the power of falling further or getting up again. The same spring lifts a stout platform a couple of yards below the floor, so that if the leaves of the trap should accidentally give way it would catch the game I wished to save. Still another spring opens the leaves and works the platform upward until whoever it catches can step out in safety.

"Of course all this was unknown to Pistol Johnny, and he flung out his arms, catching by his hands alone and supporting his entire weight by the strength of his wrists. Not a cry or sound escaped his lips, and his face was as calm and unmoved as though he stood on firm ground, in the midst of an army of tried and true friends. That gave me the first sight of his true grit, but it only made me the more determined to break his will and make him beg for mercy before sending him down to death on the rocks at the bottom of the old shaft.

"I took particular pains to tell him what awaited him when his strength should fail, but apparently my words made no more impression than if they had been flung into the ears of a stone image; and thinking, maybe, that his nerve would break sooner if left alone, I went into the other room, but took good care to keep a secret watch upon the little rascal.

"His strength of arm proved to be fairly marvelous, but at length I could see that it was failing him, and I looked eagerly for some trace of fear—but in vain!

"All at once he lifted his hands above his head, thinking to drop instantly down through the trap, but the leaves still held him up. Out I came, swift as a flash, thinking surely the surprise would shake him—only to have the man pay me a compliment, cool as a cucumber!"

"Bah!" and Dandy Darling flung out one hand, with a short laugh: "what is the use? I

tried all I knew, but I could not shake him an atom. I offered him temptations that would have won over a saint, but they had no effect upon him. I tested his nerve in every imaginable shape and form, trying to make up my mind to touch the spring that would send him down to death—but there, too, I failed. I could not bring myself to kill the cool, gritty rascal; and in the end I let him go free."

Each swift sentence was bitter as gall itself to the silently listening gambler. He felt that Daisy Darling had fallen in love with the man whom she praised so highly, and he mentally swore to cut his heart out at the very first opportunity that offered. But bearing his recent lesson in mind, he clinched his teeth tightly and spoke not a word of comment as the woman sport brought her recital to an abrupt end.

"Well, what have you to say?" demanded Dandy, at length.

"Nothing; save that I am waiting your orders."

"No savage outburst of jealousy? No fierce threats to shower on the head of the man whom I have freely acknowledged proposing marriage to?"

"I hold your pledge to reward me in good time. I'll wait until my share of the work is completed, then I will ask you to make me happy. If you refuse—time enough then to think of revenge," slowly replied Dave Pandy.

Dandy Darling gazed at him for a brief space in silence, then nodded approvingly as she laughed:

"Good enough, Davy lad! I see my lesson has struck its roots deep, and will not soon be forgotten. All the same, if Jack o' the Double Six hadn't proved himself such an insensible block, you would be wearing the willow by now!"

"And you crape as his widow before his kisses could fairly dry on your lips!" was the cold, stern retort.

"I believe you mean it, too!" exclaimed Dandy, gazing keenly into his white, hard-set face. "But all that goes for nothing, now. Let's get back to business."

"As I was saying, Arthur Cavendish and I are equal partners in this little game. We are to divide the profits, and as she can be of no particular use to me, he is to marry the girl, putting her in at a figure yet to be determined."

"That will be no fool of a job, if she loves Wilkinson."

"That's where my part of the work comes in. I am to marry Woody before her very eyes—"

"He'll never do that!" exclaimed Pandy, confidently.

"I'm betting my ducats *he will!*"

"But the jig is up now. They've got safe to camp. The old man must have got wind of your plans, for he has skipped the country. He'll send them warning, and even if you could manage to run off the young folks, they would stow the cash away where you can't touch it. And all through the meddling of that infernal Pistol Johnny!"

"You say Felix Tiffany has skipped?"

"Nearly a week ago. Just how or why he left, nobody seems able to satisfactorily explain, though there are a dozen wild rumors floating about camp."

"I spoke of having another card in reserve. That card is Felix Tiffany, and when we play him, the game is won."

"What do you mean? I don't understand!"

"While I was watching for the return of Wilkinson and the girl, Cavendish was putting in some good work. Though we confidently expected to take our game with the aid of the lads on the trail, a failure was barely possible, and to guard against wrecking on this point, Cavendish kidnapped the old gentleman, leaving behind him a carefully-worded note which Woody Wilkinson has doubtless discovered and read long before this. Never mind just what that note contained. Enough that it will keep Wilkinson from asking any dangerous questions, and keep him on the lookout for anothermissive written in the same fist—an admirable copy of that slung by the old gentleman himself.

"Wilkinson will hear just enough to make him fancy his intended father-in-law has skipped through fear—that he has made a false step of some sort that might end with his dancing on nothing at the end of a rope, unless he can gain time to secure proof of his innocence. The second note will hint still more plainly at this, and beg Wilkinson to take the money and the girl and follow the bearer of that note, under cover of night, to the place where the old gentleman is in hiding. It will give him the impression that upon his prompt compliance depends the fate of the writer."

"The messenger will give him no time for thought or to weigh the question, and thus being forced to act on the spur of the moment, the young fellow can hardly help falling into the trap. At the end of their journey others than the one whom they expect to meet will be awaiting them. There will be a double wedding—"

"You are still resolved to marry that fellow?" interrupted Pandy, his voice low and

steady, but with the red, ugly glow deepening in his blue eyes.

"Anything to win the stakes, Davy, lad," was the careless reply. "Cavendish says the girl is gritty beyond the common run of her sex, and as she is over head and ears in love with young Wilkinson, she would suffer any torments sooner than wed another man, unless we can convince her of his infidelity."

"When she sees another standing where she fondly expected to stand—when she hears him promise to love, honor, and obey yours truly—she will weaken. In her misery she will not be hard to manage, and when she is bound safe and snug to Cavendish, the game will be over, all save dividing the spoils."

"We will own equal shares in the mine. Cavendish will take the girl as an offset to the cash, which will come into my pockets. We will develop the mine, and settle down to a life of quiet respectability in our old age!"

"And my share—where and when does that come in?" demanded Dave Pandy, with more fire in his tones than he had dared to exhibit since that humiliating lesson which Dandy Darling had read him.

"That will come when you have faithfully performed the share of the work set apart for you," was the cool response.

"Let me know what it is, then. I must work, to keep my hot blood down. What am I to do?"

"Your first duty is to see that Thompson Hurd is put out of the way, for good and all."

"You said he would surely be lynched in the morning!"

"I've concluded not to risk that; and I'll tell you why. I had a few words with Cavendish, this evening, and we agreed on a surer plan. You know Hurd belongs to the band, though he was kept in ignorance of just what we hoped to gain by our last raid on the stage. He has been drinking heavily for the past year, and his nerve is beginning to fail him. When he is brought out to face the rope in broad daylight, he will weaken and try to buy his life by 'blowing the gaff,' and selling out the gang. A bint at the revelations he could make, would secure him a reprieve long enough to make a clean breast of it; and that risk must be guarded against."

"If you bad not interfered—"

"But I did interfere," was the sharp interruption. "I had my reasons for doing so, and at that time I had not seen Cavendish. You know the oath that binds the gang to aid each other when in trouble. Some of the fellows may try to rescue their mates; but as we are on the point of breaking up the business for good and all, the more of them out of the way the safer the rest of us will be. You understand?"

"Maybe; but I'd rather you put it into plain speech. If I know precisely what is expected of me, you cannot blame me for carrying the orders out."

Dandy Darling laughed shortly at his evident distrust, but then proceeded to put her wishes into words:

"You will circulate among the citizens, and throw out your hints. Select a few men whom you know to be opposed to Hurd and the gang, and touch their tempers lightly. They will quickly catch up the cry for blood, and then you can drop into the background. They will storm the calaboose and while they are busied with the others, do you make sure of your particular game. Don't let him slip through your fingers this time, or you'll sup sorrow for your clumsiness!"

"Pistol Johnny is with the guard. He'll show fight. If a stray bullet drops him for good, you'll not go into mourning for the dead?" slowly, meaningly asked Dave Pandy.

"Don't you fire that stray shot, Davy, lad, if you ever hope to call yourself my master!" was the significant reply. "I have work for Pistol Johnny to do, and you mustn't spoil it by your mad jealousy. Of course he must take his chances, if he is mad enough to risk his life in the defense of those whom his doings have brought under the shadow of the rope. But if any accident should befall him, be sure I will sift it to the bottom, and act accordingly. You comprehend?"

"And after all—when the game is won?" he muttered huskily, as he arose from his seat. "Give me a ghost of a hope to feed on, Daisy! It's not much that I ask!"

"Well—if my gay young husband does not live too long, you may be happy yet, my doleful lad!" the woman sport laughed as she also arose. "Will that serve for the present?"

"I suppose it must—but he will never wear gray hair, unless I am killed first!" and bending his head, the love-mad gambler pressed a burning kiss upon the back of her hand.

"I hardly think he comes of a long-lived stock, and I dare say the delirious joy of possessing the belle of Tight Squeeze as a bride, will prove fatal to the poor lad!"

"Go, now, Davy, and prove yourself worthy of your hire."

She opened the door and stood to one side to permit his exit. As he crossed the threshold and she closed the door behind him, a strange and startling change came over her face.

"Go, you poor, silly idiot!" she muttered, her

eyes filled with a baleful light. "Your work once done, and I'll freeze you out, if I have to drive a knife through your fierce heart with my own hand!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LOAN OF A LIFE.

At that time and place there could be no possibility of mistaking the real meaning of that sullen roar, broken now and then by a shrill, fierce yell, not unlike that which comes from a famishing panther as it leaps upon its helpless prey and anticipates the glorious feast of blood.

In the main room of the little shanty which had been selected as a temporary prison, Tansy Dick and his fellow guards interchanged swift glances, then looked meaningly toward the corner where lay the masked road-agents. They, bound hand and foot though they were, started convulsively as though desirous of seeking safety in flight, for the moment forgetting that they were helpless prisoners.

Thompson Hurd, back in the lit'le shed-kitchen, groveled on the earthen floor, tugging desperately at his bonds, groaning, gasping, cursing—now begging for mercy and pleading his utter unfitness for death; now pouring out a flood of blasphemy, wild and bitter enough to shock the most confirmed atheist.

Crouching with his head inclined in an attitude of keenest attention, Pistol Johnny listened to those ominous sounds, not moving a muscle until he made sure the mob was only in process of forming—that as yet it had not begun its impetuous march to the frail prison.

Then he stooped and clutched Thompson Hurd by the arm with a force that almost buried his fingers in the flesh, causing the condemned murderer to change his wild ravings to a subdued howl of pain.

"Quiet, you poor, cowardly dog!" grated Pistol Johnny, as he turned the groveling wretch over until the light fell fairly upon his fear distorted countenance, bending low and speaking with rapid distinctness: "Listen to me, unless you would forever lose the last frail hope of saving your worthless—you worse than worthless carcass!"

Half crazy with fear, Thompson Hurd was like a drowning man who blindly catches at a shadow as it passes him by, and an eager quiver shook his frame as he stared into the face of the man who could breathe a hope of saving his life—only to close them again with a gasping curse as he recognized the being whom he had so terribly wronged in the days gone by: for he felt that his enemy was only mocking him in his utter wretchedness.

"It's *your* work; curse you for a merciless bloodhound!" he snarled, his eyes glowing redly, like those of a cornered wild beast. "Only for you I would not be here. Only for you I would be free. It is *your* work that bound me like a dog, so that the mob you raised could butcher me without giving me even a chance to fight for my life!"

And then he poured forth a string of maniacal curses and horrible blasphemy, which ended only for want of breath, as Pistol Johnny once more gripped him by the throat and choked him into silence.

"Will you listen to me, you foul-mouthed cur?" he grated, sternly, as he relaxed his suffocating grasp and peered keenly down into those wolfish, bloodshot eyes. "Another outburst like that, and I will abandon you to your fate. Curb your tongue, and choke down your fears until the danger comes nearer than it is now. Listen! The sounds are no closer. It may be only a drunken row. If it is a mob gathering to lynch you for your dastardly murder this evening, they are not yet ready to take the last step. You can understand what I say?"

An inarticulate sound escaped the lips of the crime-stained wretch, but it was evident that the lesson read him by the steel-muscled sport was not wholly without good effect.

At that moment came a tapping on the door which furnished communication between the two rooms, and the voice of Tansy Dick called out:

"I say, pard; d'y' hear that gay ole racket over camp-ways? It's a be-ole circus jest strikin' up, or else the boys is gittin' ready fer to cut out some high ole fun fer us critters over this-a-way."

"A necktie festival, you think?"

Kinder looks that-a-way to a man up a stump—durned ef it don't!" and there was a tinge of the rueful in the voice of the doughty driver. "Mebbe it's only a private row 'mongst the boys. I'm goin' out to see what the prospect is. Ef it smells too loud o' hemp, I'll take a short cut back an' let you know. Better take your tools an' come out with the boys while I'm gone."

"Not yet," was the quiet response. "Time enough. They're wasting too much wind to be very much in earnest as yet. But it won't do any hurt for you to scout around a little. Take good care of yourself, and don't get your fingers burnt."

"All right. The boys'll let ye out when you give a rap. But I'll be back before the band begins to play in airnest," laughed Tansy Dick, turning away from the door.

Pistol Johnny heard him pass out of the building, heard the half-dozen guards who remained behind, close and fasten the barrier; then he turned once more to his prisoner.

Thompson Hurd had gathered some faint consolation from this rapid interchange of words, for from it he knew that his enemies would meet with more or less resistance from the men on guard. It was a frail hope, at the best, but it was enough to calm his shattered nerves in a measure.

Pistol Johnny nodded with grim approval as he gazed down into the battered visage.

"Good! you have recovered your wits sufficiently to understand what I say. So much the better, for there's precious little time to waste in idle repetitions if you wish to save that bull-neck from getting stretched!"

"What do you mean? I am listening. Speak fast!" muttered the murderer, the word seeming to issue from his throat with great difficulty.

"Tansy Dick will give us ample warning, never fear," replied Pistol Johnny, his voice growing cold and composed. "If you remember, I told you I had taken another oath besides the bitter one I hurled at you from the dock when that judge sat down after pronouncing sentence upon me.

"When I served my time out, and was turned loose, my first thought was to find you and wreak a just vengeance on the false friend who had so bitterly and shamefully betrayed me to the earth!

"At that time I knew nothing of what had taken place while I was buried alive. I knew nothing of your having been married to the woman who had sworn she would be my wife; and when I made the discovery, it almost crushed me to the earth!"

"Never mind what I suffered. Words could not express one tithe of the bitter agony that fresh discovery gave me, and there is no time to waste, just now."

"It was when I was at the lowest, that I made the discovery of one remaining friend. Never mind his name. Enough that he took me to his home and there nursed me back to life. From him I learned the full particulars of your marriage with Marcia Ranney, and he told me, too, that you had disposed of all of your property and left town, no one seemed to know whither.

"From a hint dropped by him, I paid a visit to the lawyer who defended me at my trial, and there I received a sealed envelope. Within was a long letter from Marcia, written on the eve of her wedding. In it she told me how long and desperately she had struggled to resist her growing love for you. She swore that she had been faithful to me until it was proven I was a criminal; then she yielded. She hoped I would forgive her in the course of time; that I would live through my term of punishment, and come out into the world with a changed spirit. She believed me guilty—more of *your* devilish work, Ishmael Black!"

"She begged of me to forgive the part you were so reluctantly forced to play in my trial. She said it tore your honest heart to ribbons, but that your oath compelled you to testify to the simple truth. She begged me to forgive both you and her; to spare you for her sake—But why go on? Let it suffice for the present that I then took the second vow of which I spoke.

"I swore that I would never know rest until I had run you to earth. If I found you had been true to her—if I found her still living happily with you—if you had treated her as I could have treated her, only for your satanic plot—I would bide my time and wait until she passed away before taking my revenge upon you. If not—if you had proven yourself a traitor to her, even as you had to me—then I would have your heart's blood!"

"For long years I sought for some clew, but in vain. You had hidden your tracks well, and I was all at sea. Still I did not forget my double oath for a day—for an hour, or a moment, asleep or awake. I searched on, wandering here and there, only to meet with steady disappointment until this night.

"When I recognized you, I would have killed you like the soulless cur you are, in my first transports of furious hatred and longings for vengeance, only for Tansy Dick. He interfered to save me from killing you, and I quickly recovered my senses and remembered my second oath. Yet I resolved you should suffer some punishment, and only for the probability of a mob coming to avenge the death of your last victim, I would not now be telling you this. I would keep you in suspense until the first dawn of day—"

A louder, fiercer outburst from the direction of the main portion of the mining-camp, caused Pistol Johnny to abruptly cease speaking, and bend his ear again in acute attention.

Thompson Hurd writhed in his bonds with growing apprehension, for not yet could his unsteadied brain fully comprehend the meaning of his bitter enemy.

"If you mean to do anything for me, why don't you act, not waste precious time in chinning?" he snarled, his brow damp with sweat, his features hideously contorted.

"A little suspense will do you no harm, Ishmael Black," retorted Pistol Johnny with a grim laugh. "When the avengers of blood are fairly at your heels, you will be more apt to appreciate my magnanimity than were I to give you time to lay a cold trail for them to follow."

"Then you mean to set me free?" gasped the murderer, unable to believe his hearing, yet grasping at the hope, so intense was his dread of the lynching noose.

"It does seem incredible, don't it?" slowly answered Pistol Johnny, his voice hard and forced as he squatted beside the prisoner, his burning gaze fixed upon him. "Recall all that you made me suffer! Six centuries passed in that black hole! My name covered with obloquy! My life forever wrecked! My bride stolen away by your lying arts, and made to believe in my guilt!"

Again they both started, as the sound of rapid footsteps were heard without, followed by the sound of Tansy Dick's voice demanding admittance. Breathlessly they listened to catch his words, but only a dull, confused jumble of sounds rewarded them. Then, the door between the two rooms opened, and Tansy Dick thrust his shaggy head through, saying swiftly:

"It's jest as I thunk, boss. The boys is fillin' up with the wu'st whisky they kin corral an' talkin' twisted hemp fer the bull outfit—Tom Hurd more than the others, ef anythin'. They mean business, too, though they're waitin' fer to git a good send-off before they come a-whoopin', red-hot fer mischief. Now what's the programme fer we-us-an'-kump'ny?"

"Why do you ask me?"

Tansy Dick scratched the tip of his rosy nose a little dubiously before replying to this blunt query.

"Waal, the boys they thought as how—bein' as it was mainly through *your* doin's that these pesky critters bes to be guarded—that you was by rights the one to say which we hed better do: fight it out, or shove our han's inter our pockets an' let the boys bev full swing down hyar. No 'fence?"

Pistol Johnny hesitated for a brief space before answering, his eyes cast down, one crooked finger pushing his mustache in between his gnawing teeth. Then he looked up and spoke rapidly:

"Give me ten minutes more with this fellow, if the boys hold off that long. Then I'll come out, and we'll talk over what is best to be done. Only ten minutes, Tansy, boy!"

"Ef the boys out yender don't cut it short, be sure none o' us will," grinned the relieved driver, removing his head and shutting the door once more.

Pistol Johnny turned to Thompson Hurd, speaking rapidly:

"I think I have said enough to give you a pretty accurate idea of my position, Ishmael Black. I am going to set you at liberty, though it comes like drawing eye teeth to let up on my grip, now that I have run you to earth. But don't make a mistake; I am doing this solely for the sake of the one whom I once loved far dearer than my own life. You owe your life to the letter which she wrote me when on the eve of joining her life to yours—the letter which awaited my coming for six long years, for my friend, the one who alone met me when the prison doors opened to spew me forth after a living burial worse ten thousand times than death itself!—in whose hands it was placed by the writer, thought it best not to deliver it to me until I was free. If I died in prison, then I would be spared one bitter pang. If I came out, time enough then for me to learn all!"

Once more that dull roar burst out into a wild, blood-curdling yell, and once more the craven assassin groveled on the earthen floor, suffering the tortures of the damned in his savage dread lest the man who held his life in his hand to save or to destroy, should delay action until escape became impossible.

"I know—I understand!" he gasped, but with a fierce glare upward into that white, stern face. "No need to say any more—don't you hear? Curse you, John Woodcock! you're only playing with me! You mean to give me over to those devils to be murdered, after all!"

A hard, scornful laugh was the only reply Pistol Johnny deigned to give to this wild outburst, but then he bent forward and with nimble fingers picked apart the knots which held the stout thongs in place, never ceasing until the murderer was set at liberty, hand and foot.

Then Thompson Hurd sprung erect, with a low, grating snarl, his eyes on fire, his voice husky with a savage resolve, as he muttered:

"Now if you think to play me foul, I'll not go under without a fight for life! I'll have time to strangle you!"

"Stop!" whispered Pistol Johnny, rising and stepping within arm's length of the madman, shaking one finger in his face as he spoke. "One more word of that, and I'll tie you again and leave you to meet your death, big as you are! Dog! dare you show your teeth to me!"

Thompson Hurd was cowed, and shrank away from the gritty little sport, until the

wall would suffer him to retreat no further. A low, contemptuous laugh parted the lips of his foe.

"Now you are showing your true colors, Ishmael Black! A dog you have lived, and a dog you shall die—but not just yet. I set you free to go whither you will, but remember—it is only a life loaned. Sooner or later I will claim it again."

"For her sake, I will hold my hand. I don't ask you where she is; you would only try to lie to me. I will hunt her up, if I live through this night's work. If you have abused her in any way, shape or manner, I'll hunt you down and kill you!"

"And then marry my widow!" sneered the wretch, unable to hold back the taunt, even while he trembled with abject fear.

Like a flash Pistol Johnny leaped forward and caught him by the throat, holding him helpless, shaking him as a terrier might a crippled rat, hissing savagely:

"Dog! one more word like that, and I'll throw all other vows to the wind and tear your vile heart out of your body! Are you mad, you fool?" he added, as he suddenly released the trembling wretch and moved toward the side door, taking down the bar and flinging open the barrier. "Do you want to aid the devil to get the upperhand of me? Go! or I'll kill you!"

Without a word in reply, Thompson Hurd skulked to the door, keeping his bloodshot eyes fixed upon the face of his terrible foe until safely outside; then a surly snarl came from his lips, as he stole away through the night.

Louder and nearer came that yell for blood, but Pistol Johnny silently closed the door and sat down in the kitchen.

CHAPTER XX.

WHICH HORN OF THE DILEMMA?

SQUATTING on his heels in the little shed-kitchen, staring vacantly at the spot where his bitterest enemy had lain helplessly at his mercy only a few minutes before, Pistol Johnny seemed lost in moody thought. He seemed to hear nothing of the steadily-increasing tumult without, to be ignorant of the subdued excitement which reigned among the guards in the other room.

The black, merciless tragedy of his past life was being repeated before his mental vision, scene by scene, act after act, with a frightful fidelity that caused his breath to come in short, hot gasps, his hands to clutch until the red blood seemed about to start from under the finger-nails, his eyes to glow and glitter like those of some hunted wild beast.

Then he was innocent of crime and all desperate deeds. He was loved, respected and honored. He stood on the threshold of life, with a brilliant prospect opening before him. He had riches enough for one who bravely meant to fight his way upward in the world. He had an education, a profession, and, above all else, the love of a beautiful girl who had promised to share his future with him.

Now—a man whose only aim in life was to bitterly avenge his more bitter past! A man with the degrading brand of the penitentiary on his brow. With his once-honored name covered with shame and obloquy. With his future hopes all blasted, his life ruined, his faith in human purity and truth forever destroyed! And all this the work of the man whom he had trusted and loved—the man on whose truth and honesty he would once have staked his life without the remotest fear of losing!

Redder gleamed his eyes, firmer set his steel-like muscles as he thought of all this, and remembered that but a few short minutes before, that dastardly traitor had lain helplessly at his feet, bound for the sacrifice! He, whose devilish treachery deserved death a thousand times—

An impatient tapping at the door which communicated between the two rooms, startled Pistol Johnny from his dark and soul-blackening ponderings. He lifted his head with a swift and savage glare around him, as though suddenly awakened from some frightful dream, the grim phantom-actors in which he fancied were still about him.

But then he recognized the sound. He could hear that fierce roar, growing plainer and more distinct as the cunningly-wrought upon mob turned their faces toward the little hut where their intended victims were confined. He knew that the guards in the larger room were growing impatient as the minutes stole by without his coming to join in the discussion as promised, and a hard, set smile crept over his white face.

"I say, boss!" came the half angry, half-coaxing voice of Tansy Dick as he shook the door sharply. "We don't want to crowd your bosses beyond thar nat'ral gait, but ef we're goin' to do any 'cussin' this matter, we ain't got no time to waste! The whisky is gittin' in its work, an' from them yelps, the boys is comin', head up an' tail over the dasher!"

Still the little man crouched there, staring at the dull light of the lantern, his chin supported upon his tightly clinched fists, giving not a sound to show that he heard that summons.

And then Tansy Dick took down the bar and opened the door, thrusting his shaggy head through with a growl:

"Sa-ay! hev all two both o' ye chawed each other up so clean that ye cain't—Waal, durn my nigh wheeler's off hind heel!" he spluttered, staring around him with an air of most ludicrous amazement as he failed to discover the prisoner.

"Ef the little cuss hain't swallered the big 'un, body, boots an' britches, I'm a howlin' liar!"

There was a rush of his fellow-guards to the door, and Pistol Johnny, once more his cool, steel-nerved self, confronted them without a trace of excitement or uneasiness in his voice or manner.

"If you are looking for Thompson Hurd, gentlemen, you'll hardly find him in here. He's gone."

"But whar? You didn't swaller him?" stammered Tansy.

"Well, hardly!" with a grim smile as he pressed past the thoroughly bewildered men and stepped within the main room.

"Then whar in blue blazes hes he gone?"

"I concluded he wasn't prepared to die just yet, and so turned him loose to cheat the rope if he could."

The guards fell away from him as though there was contagion in his very proximity. Their looks of stupid wonder changed to angry suspicion, and one of their number growled:

"You was in cahoots with him all the time, an' that was the reason you was so ready to fought fer him when the boys had the rope ready! You was makin' b'lieve all the time you pertended fer to want to tear his thrapple out! You've played us dirt, durn ye!"

More than one nervous hand dropped to the butt of knife or revolver as the indignant guard hissed out this charge, but with folded arms, Pistol Johnny faced them, a cold smile curling his mustached lip, not a tremor betraying fear of the death that threatened to be his portion.

Faithful Tansy leaped before him, and motioned his angry fellows back, speaking hastily:

"Down with the brakes, lads! You cain't jump a fri'nd o' mine when he ain't heeled, 'less you mount me too! It's all a pizen mux, an' sets my cabeza to whirlin' faster than a hub in a runaway—but I'm open to bet my last shirt that the little cuss ain't did it without good reason. Le's hear him, anyways, afore punchin' his ticket fer a through trip!"

This appeal, or else the undaunted demeanor of Pistol Johnny, produced the desired effect. Hands came away from deadly weapons, and the six men sullenly waited for the proposed explanation.

Without, the uproar was increasing, and all inside the temporary prison felt that the crisis could not be much longer delayed. Practiced hands were manipulating the crowd, now urging them on, only to check them again; working up their evil passions to fever heat, and watching for the moment when a single rush would carry them to victory.

For this reason, perhaps, Pistol Johnny yielded a little more readily than he would have otherwise done, gentle pushing his honest advocate aside, and speaking rapidly, clearly:

"I captured Thompson Hurd, when, but for me, his escape for at least this night, was almost assured. I did not know then who or what he was. I recognized him when his face was exposed to the light. He is my personal game, and I have taken a solemn oath to kill him. But he knows something that I must learn, before he dies. He refused to speak. I knew the mob was gathering to lynch him. If he died thus, he would take his secret with him, and so I turned him loose."

"Right or wrong, I am ready to stand by my actions. When I did not know who he really was, I passed my word that if he was suffered to remain under my care until another sun rose, I would be personally responsible for him. I meant what I said then, and I still hold to it."

"I reckon it's all right, ef you say so," muttered Tansy Dick, rubbing the tip of his ruby-tinted nose; "but durned ef I kin see whar the boys' sheer o' fun comes in when they gather at the river fer the little sullerbration! Cuss-words 'll be layin' round thar knee-deep an' deeper, when they diskiver the clown bes skun off on his rear an' bu'sted the hull circus wide open!"

Pistol Johnny laughed shortly, carelessly.

"One may be taken, but there'll be another left, and the ceremony can go on all the same. I passed my word to produce Thompson Hurd when called for, or else assume all his responsibilities and take his place beneath the gallows.

I turned the murderer loose for reasons quite satisfactory to my own conscience. I will offer my neck for his and I reckon the citizens of Tight Squeeze will get a little the best of the swap: at least they can have a man to pull rope where they expected to have a cowardly cur!"

Swiftly, yet coldly, Pistol Johnny uttered these last words, but they were almost drowned by the wild shouts and cries which rose from without. The mob was moving on the calaboose, and their heavy trampling could already be distinguished even amid that ferocious chorus.

There was no time now to comment on or discuss the action of Pistol Johnny in setting at liberty the murderer.

"They're comin', hot foot—an' they means business, chuck up!" muttered Tansy Dick, his brows contracting as he tore a huge mouthful of tobacco from a plug. "They'll lynch the critters, dead sure, unless we kin stand 'em off with powder an' shot. I hate the idee o' givin' up an' lettin' them do us dirt that-a-way; an' I'd hate wuss yit to hev to kill white men in 'fendiu' dirty niggers like these. Thar's only the two ways I kin see how to jump, an' no matter which one a pore devil takes, he's boun' to 'light onto the pint of a horn sharper'n that of a Texan steer! What you say, boss?"

He addressed Pistol Johnny, a troubled look in his eyes; but he was fated to receive little consolation from that source. It was a difficult part the cool sport had to play, thanks to the curious turn events had taken, but he had laid out his course and steadily held to it.

"Why ask me?" he replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I have not a word to say. If I had, it should carry no weight to the minds of honest men. I am Thompson Hurd, a murderer, and one of the men those bloodhounds intend to lynch. Better tie me up, or they may accuse you of being too friendly to a convicted assassin."

Thoroughly dumfounded, Tansy Dick stared with dilated eyes at the speaker, his open jaws closing with a sharp click as a loud, stern voice came from outside the shanty:

"Hallo the house! In the calaboose, there!"

Pistol Johnny turned away and seated himself on the floor beside the three captive road-agents, as though he had no further interest in the affair.

Tansy Dick stared at him a moment, shaking his shaggy head dubiously, then glanced at his mates, tapping his forehead with a forefinger as he muttered:

"Gone clean looney, or I'm a howlin' liar!"

The momentary silence which had followed the bail from without, now fled before a savage shout denoting impatience, and the spokesman again hailed the guards:

"Face the music, Tansy Dick and company, unless you want to stretch hemp along with the others! Talk out like white men! Which is it? A fight or a surrender?"

A swift glance around showed Tansy Dick that he was expected to take the lead in that crisis, and on the spur of the moment, he shouted:

"What's the matter with you pesky critters, anyway? What ye come howlin' round here fer, this time o' night?"

"Don't you be a fool, Tansy Dick!" came the impatient retort. "You know who I am?"

Tansy Dick did know, and his companions as well, but that knowledge did not appear to impart any particular satisfaction to any of them, just then.

"Art Cavendish, I jedge, from the blaat o' your bazoo," the stage-driver shortly replied.

"True as gospel writ, old fellow," with a clear, hard laugh that had little of mirth or jollity in its tones. "You know me. You know that when I say a thing, it is good as sworn to. Now I tell you frankly that the boys have induced me to play ringmaster in this little circus of theirs. They think this fine evening was just made for a necktie festival, and as you fellows keep the best assortment of the goods they require, here we are, to take your whole stock off your hands."

"It's too late fer to make a squar' trade now," replied Tansy, thinking it best to fall into the grim lead set him by Arthur Cavendish. "The shettlers is putt up, an' all the clarks gone off on a jamboree. Call in the mornin' when—"

"We prefer the night—not because we're ashamed to let the bright sun shine on our deeds, but since we must dirty our hands with the living carrion, better by moonlight, when the stains will not show so plain. Come!" and the tone of the mob leader changed abruptly: "Talk enough, Tansy Dick! We've come here for those men, and we mean to have them. If a grain of powder is burned by you, in their defense, I'll not answer for the consequences. Surrender them quietly, and all will be well. Hold out against us, and you'll get hurt-bad!"

"It's a mighty bitter pill you're givin' us, ole man," the stage-driver growled, irritably. "Give us ten minutes to talk it over an' make up our minds."

There was a brief silence, as though the chief men among the mob were discussing this point; then Cavendish replied:

"All right; you can take the time, for we don't want to hurt you if we can gain our point without. But be careful how you try to play any tricks on us. The shanty is surrounded on every side, and a rat couldn't slip through our lines without being discovered and invited to halt by a bullet."

Tansy Dick turned toward Pistol Johnny, who sat beside the road-agents, chin bowed on his clinched fists, his face white but cold, and expressing not the slightest emotion.

"Durn it all, mate!" half-coaxingly, half-angrily muttered the stage driver. "This ain't the pure white article! Ef it hedn't bin fer you, none o' us'd find ourselves in this pizen, nasty box. Brusk up, an' show us a way out of it."

Pistol Johnny slowly raised his eyes until they met the disturbed, nervous gaze of the stage driver, but without altering his position in the least.

"I told you I had no right to say anything. I am filling the shoes of Thompson Hurd, one of the poor devils those men are on fire to hang. Naturally I am prejudiced—"

"That be durned!" snarled one of the guards. "You cain't sneak out of it no sech way as that. Up an' play your part in the rumpus, like a man, or durned ef you shain't play the part set down fer Tom Hurd, clean to the end—an' I'll throw all my weight onto the other end o' the rope!"

"I counted the cost before I set him free. I know the penalty, and I am ready to pay it when called upon. Whether your hand holds the other end of the rope, matters little to me. If your nerve fails you, there'll be no lack of others to play the part of hangman," coldly replied Pistol Johnny.

"Now come," and Tansy Dick placed one hand appealingly on the shoulder of the self-doomed sport. "I ax it as a mate, ole man. What shell we do? Ef we stick it out we kin kill mebbe a dozen or so of the boys afore they close in on us. Thar's them out yender that's nigh like brothers to us, but ef it comes to a down-right fight, we won't hev time to pick an' choose whar to plant our lead. An' even ef we, by pure luck, didn't down any but the wust pills in the box, them would be a thousan' times whiter than the dirty whelps that we fit fer."

"Take the other side: would it be white fer us to step aside an' let them be hung, when we passed our words to keep 'em safe ontel day comes? When the circus is over, an' the hot blood cools off, wouldn't them very men as tuck the fust rank in the lynchin' bee be the fust ones to p'int the finger o' scorn at us fer lackin' sand?"

Truly, it was an awkward predicament in which the six guards found themselves, and the painfully-working countenance of honest Tansy showed how thoroughly he realized this fact.

They knew the person who had assumed control of the mob—Arthur Cavendish. He bore the reputation of being a dangerous man, with all the ferocity and reckless disregard for consequences which marks a bull-dog of pure blood. It was currently reported that he kept more than one "private graveyard" in a flourishing condition; and it was known that twice he had killed his man in Tight Squeeze, in fair fight.

A gambler by profession, as he frankly owned himself to be, he was a wanderer whose comings and goings could never be discounted with anything like certainty. When in Tight Squeeze, he was generally to be found at Dandy's Den, playing high at one or the other of the faro-tables, and his "luck" had almost become proverbial, for he rarely quit the game a loser.

Pistol Johnny answered Tansy Dick with something of his old-time quiet, yet decisive manner:

"If I was a free agent, and found myself in the box you unfortunately occupy, my first act would be to give those rope-bearing gentry on the outside, frank warning what they might expect, if they insisted on intruding where their company was not wanted. Then, I would defend my charge the best I knew how, putting my lead where it would do the most good."

An angry, sneering snarl broke from the lips of one of the guards—the same who had shown such a strong dislike to Pistol Johnny from the first.

"It's easy to talk, but you cain't stuff that down me! You got us into this nasty hobble, an' now you're tryin' to sneak out of it with a hull hide! But it won't work here!"

A stern light leaped into those steel-gray eyes as they turned toward the grumbler; but that was the only evidence of how sharply his words stung the little sport. His voice was even and cold as ever when he addressed, not the man but Tansy Dick:

"Understand me. I am not laying down the law for you. Different men take different views of the same thing, and in this unfortunate affair, you must be guided by your own judgment. I merely state the course I would follow were I a free man, instead of an unarmed prisoner."

"But ef we fight, you'll help us?" urged Tansy Dick.

"I will not," was the cold response. "Men would sneer and say that I was afraid to face the consequences of my own act. You would not think for a moment of setting Thompson Hurd at liberty and place weapons in his hands? Very well: to all intents and purposes, I am Thompson Hurd."

"You make me tired!" sneered Griffin. "Come out flatfooted an' say you lack the sand—that you're a durned coward, who gits white men into a box, an' then don't dast to help 'em out of it! That's the kind o' tater-bug you be!"

Pistol Johnny leaped to his feet, his face white

as that of a corpse, his eyes flashing fire, his voice hard and stern:

"If you look at it in that light, give me my tools. Sneak outside and tell those men to come and take their prey. I'll defend them as long as I can pull trigger or—"

"Time is up, Tansy Dick!" shouted the voice of Arthur Cavendish from without. "What is your decision—fight or knuckle down and yield to the inevitable? Spit it out in a hurry, and let it be once for all! My gentle lambs are growing impatient, and I can't hold them in check much longer!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A BOOTLESS VICTORY.

WITH a savage, hunted snarl, Tansy Dick turned toward the door, as though expecting to see it go down before the impetuous rush of the liquor-maddened men who followed the lead of the black-bearded sport, Arthur Cavenish. But as yet the lynchers were respecting the terms their leader had accepted.

"Durn it all!" cried the stage-driver, almost beside himself, and hardly knowing what were the words his lips shaped. "Don't crowd a hoss clean off his feet on a steep up-grade! It's a monstrous nasty drench you're givin' us, an' you didn't ought to think it noways quar that we kick an' choke a little over it."

"But it has got to be swallowed, all the same," cried Arthur Cavendish, with a short, impatient laugh. "It goes down, or you go up—take your choice, and in a hurry, too!"

"Give us ten minutes more," desperately cried Tansy.

"What good?" was the sharp retort. "The situation will be just the same. The boys won't cool off any during that length of time. There's not force enough left in Tight Squeeze to raise the siege in your favor, even if they felt so inclined. You've got to surrender or fight; and you can take your choice now as well as in ten minutes later."

"Give us the ten minutes, an' I reckon we kin come to terms," urged Tansy Dick, though his doleful face flatly contradicted the utterance of his tongue. "Ef you won't—then, durn ye, come an' take us!"

There was a brief silence after this desperate outburst. The guards slowly drew their revolvers, and made sure that the cylinders worked freely. Their jaws were hard set, their eyes glowing, their faces a little paler than common; but there was naught of cowardice to be read there. If fight they must, the mob would not obtain a bloodless victory.

Then the voice of Arthur Cavendish again rung out:

"All right; ten minutes it is. But mind you, Tansy Dick! that's the very last of grace, and if you don't come to your milk then, you'll never handle ribbons or crack whip again! We'll make that blessed calaboose look mighty sick, an' fit a hemp necktie around every living thrapple we discover among the ruins! There you've got our decision—and it's *Gospel!*"

Tansy Dick turned toward his mates.

"That's long time enough fer us to hev our last say-so's I reckon. Mine won't take up much room. Jest tell the boys how I hed to make the run 'cordin' to schedule, an' ef any of 'em gits hurt in the smash-up, tell 'em not to lay it up too hard ag'in' the driver, fer the breechin' bu'sted an' the brake got out o' kilter, with us on a steep down-grade—a nasty chuck-hole at the bottom!"

He grasped their hands, one after the other, making the rounds before any of their number could penetrate the vague, metaphorical leave-takings but then Tony Griffin exclaimed:

"It's fight, then, old pard?"

"Sart'in. I never went back onto a pard, an' I'm too old fer to begin new tricks now," was the grave response.

"Then you stan' as good a chaintce as any o' us to give the boys your message," with a hard, grim laugh. "Ef you want they should know it sure, better howl it out through the night afore Cavendish gives the word to open up the circus—fer devil the one o' us'll ever croak when that's over!"

"You're wasting time to no purpose," coldly interposed Pistol Johnny. "Those are your friends and associates outside. You are not called upon to fight them. Go out and leave me to do what I can. You say I got you into the scrape; let me get you out of it after the only fashion that offers."

"Which is what I meant when I gave you that message fer the boys," quietly answered Tansy Dick. "Pistol Johnny says he got us into this fix. I say I got you all into it, fer didn't I pick you out to help me stan' guard? Skin out, you! Pard an' me'll run this end o' the show-cus."

The hard, steely glitter which had filled the gray eyes of the little sport dimmed a trifle as he looked at honest Tansy, and there was something almost like a tremor in his voice as he hastily uttered:

"They'll go—and you'll go with them, old man. This is my little side-show, and I can run it best without help. Shake hands, and then pull out while you can!"

"Shake it is—an' glad to do it, Johnny," was

the grinning response as their strong, and true grip closed firmly. "But you cain't lay me off thbet-a-way! Ef you say fight, I'm with you tell the curtain goes down!"

"Say—you fellows are wasting a heap of chin music!" cried one of the black-hooded road-agents—the same who had masqueraded under the title of King Philip. "If it isn't all wind, and you are really opposed to giving us over to the rope without a show for our lives, allow me to make a little suggestion which may serve to break the dead-lock."

In surprise the guards turned toward the speaker, who coolly added:

"It would be a burning shame for you to make a fight against your friends and brothers, solely on our account. Cut our bonds, give us a pistol apiece, walk outside and tell the boys to march in and take us!"

Cool and careless as was his tone, the road-agent keenly watched the effect of his words, his eyes glittering redly through the holes in his mask. A moment's silence, then he broke out in a hard, bitter laugh:

"See what a slight puncture serves to explode your wind-bags! I knew you were only talking to keep your courage up!"

"Do it, gents, ef you're white!" cried another of the prisoners, his voice husky with mingled fear and hope. "Set us free an' we'll do the fightin' fer our own selves. Don't let us be butchered like hogs! Ef we must die, let it be fightin'! You'll never feel sorry fer actin' white to pore devils in a dead-fall like this!"

"Do it, gentlemen," urged Pistol Johnny earnestly. "I'll stay with them. You save yourselves while you can."

A sudden light flashed into the eyes of Tansy Dick, for this swift interchange showed him a chance for gaining his desired end.

"Yer it is, an' it's the last say-so I'll ever make ef you don't come to time, mate!" he cried, gripping Pistol Johnny by the shoulder, emphasizing his words with one forefinger like a lawyer driving conviction into the thick skull of a client. "Say you'll jine us, Johnny, an' we'll cut them critters loose an' give 'em tools fer to fight thar own battles. Ef you won't do that, we'll climb all over you, take you outside anyway, an' leave them pore devils to be butchered without ary one o' this outfit liftin' a finger to defend 'em! Now you got it, an' it comes straighter then the moral law!"

Pistol Johnny hesitated, but not for long. A single glance showed him how thoroughly the six guards were pleased with the decision of their spokesman. Another toward the three road-agents, the chief of whom exclaimed:

"Do it, Pistol Johnny—if not for your own sake, then for ours! Give us a chance to go under like white men, not like sheep in the shambles!"

"All right, Tansy. If you can make terms with those outside on that basis, do so. I'll not be a stumbling-block," he said quietly, taking the belt of weapons from the hand of the stage-driver and turning toward the prisoners.

"They've got to come to thar feed, or else clean out the hull drove—black sheep a' all!" chuckled Tansy Dick, as he strode to the door and removed the stout bar.

While he was thus busied, Pistol Johnny drew his knife and rapidly severed the bonds which confined the road-agents, then placed his revolvers in the hands of the man who had acted as chief in the attack on the stage.

"One word with you, old fellow," he muttered guardedly, under cover of the loud voice of Tansy Dick. "If you escape those bloodhounds with life, take good care of these tools. Unless I am wiped out for the little part I have played in this circus, I'll call on you for them sooner or later. And if you are really King Philip, I'll take you together with them. You comprehend my meaning?"

"You'll get the contents before you do the tools, Pistol Johnny—mind that!" was the grim retort.

Tansy Dick removed the bar which secured the door, and opening the barrier just sufficiently to allow his shaggy head and broad shoulders to be thrust out into the bright moonlight, he shouted aloud:

"Hello! you show-boss out yender!"

"Just in time, Tansy, to save your bacon," promptly replied Arthur Cavendish, stepping a pace or two in advance of his little army of lynchers, but pausing abruptly as the stage-driver called out warily:

"Hold yer perzish, mister man, ef you please! The boys he's got you kivered, an' they'll work button-holes all over them fine duds o' yours ef you rush in too durn close!"

"What do you mean?" and the tones of the sport became sharp and menacing. "Are you infernal idiots enough to think you can hold out against all of this crowd?"

"Waal, I reckon we could make the pot bile clean over with fun, ef so be we tuck the notion," drawled Tansy, with a grin. "But we won't hurt ye any, ef you don't crowd us too almighty close. The boys wants me to tell you what they've decided fer to do, an' so I will, ef you'll only let me git in a word aigeways once in a while!"

Tansy Dick was not playing with fire without

a definite end in view, and as a hoarse laugh broke from some of those composing the mob of lynchers, he knew that his end was won.

Arthur Cavendish also saw this, and knowing that good humor was death to a mob, sharply cried:

"No more empty wind! Get down to business. Is it surrender, or must we take you all in a lump?"

"We've talked it over, an' this is the 'clusion we've a'riv' at: either we'll fight you to the bitter end, afore we let you take the prisoners which we was sot to guard, or we'll set them loose, give them our tools, then march out an' surrender to you, lettin' them fight fer thar lives the best they know how. Thar you've got it in a nutshell. Take your choice. Ef you'd ruther fight three men then a crowd—"

"You have four prisoners!" sharply interposed Cavendish. "Thompson Hurd and the three road-agents!"

Tansy Dick hesitated a moment, confused by the slip of the tongue which he had unwittingly made; but then he bastened to smooth it over:

"Waal, ef you want him counted in, all right! Four men let it be, then! Now it's fer you to say which; four, or a clean dozen. Ef we g' to fight, we'll take all the help we kin git, an' fergit that any o' us has got ole fri'nds an' mates 'mongst your crowd. Them's the only tarms I got to offer fer yer 'sideration. Take 'em or leave 'em—which?"

"I'll give an answer in five minutes," shortly replied Cavendish, turning on his heel and beckoning one or two men from the crowd.

Tansy Dick only paused long enough to recognize among those whom Cavendish drew aside in consultation, the trim figure of Dave Pendy, and another which he felt tolerably certain must be Dandy Darling; then he withdrew his head and closed the door.

He found the three road-agents, still disguised by their masks and shapeless blouses, on their feet, though only the chief among them was armed. Pistol Johnny stood leaning against the wall, his arms folded, his eyes downcast, his face cold and emotionless.

"It was the best we could do," muttered Tansy Dick, with a very poor assumption of cheerfulness, as he cast a side glance toward the little man who had so suddenly leaped into his heart of hearts. "The say-so rests with them, now, an' when they make it, an' the circus is all over, no matter how it turns out, they cain't none o' them say we didn't show a little bit o' sand, anyhow!"

No one replied to this observation, and perfect silence reigned within the cabin until the voice of Arthur Cavendish once more rose without:

"It's all right, you fellows! Turn the thieves and murderers loose, then march out, one by one, for inspection!"

Silently Tansy Dick unbuckled his belt of weapons and dropped it to the floor. With some little hesitation, his companions followed this example, then the stage-driver removed the bar and flung open the door, emerging with a slow, somewhat dejected step. He felt the situation keenly, and his honest countenance wore a sullen, defiant scowl as he moved toward the leaders of the mob.

One by one the guards filed out, to undergo the same close inspection, as though the enemy feared some of their intended victims would endeavor to cheat them by taking a place in the line.

Last of all came Pistol Johnny, and the door clanged heavily to as he crossed the threshold.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Pistol Johnny!" exclaimed Arthur Cavendish, abruptly accosting the sport as he came near, at the same time removing his hat and bowing low with mock ceremony. "When this little affair is ended, I'll be most happy to become better known to one of your wide-spread reputation. Until then—" and again he bowed low.

Pistol Johnny gazed keenly at the speaker, his pale face slightly changing color as he listened to the words, polite enough on the surface, but covering something very like an insult.

Arthur Cavendish, but for whom many of the events already recorded in these columns would never have taken place, though circumstances have prevented his formal introduction to the reader until the present moment, was nearly as possible of the same size and build as Pistol Johnny, every movement showing the lithe grace, strength and activity of a panther.

Under the moonlight, his face, or so much of it as could be seen for the magnificent black beard which drooped, soft and silken, though so profuse in its growth, almost to his waist, showed handsome and clear cut. His eyes glowed like lamps of jet from beneath the brim of his soft felt hat.

His garb was that of a plainsman, rather than the conventional one worn by a sporting man, though on his brown hands and in the bosom of his gray flannel shirt, diamonds flashed and glimmered redly.

"I'm not hard to be found by those who seek me in earnest, be they friend or foe," coldly replied Pistol Johnny, returning the bow with a short nod, then passing along through the bustling crowd.

Arthur Cavendish laughed shortly, then cried aloud:

"Time's up, lads! Those rascals will think we are afraid to come to close quarters if we hang fire any longer! Dave Pendy, pick your men for the charge. Too many will only block the way, and give those imps a better chance for planting their mineral in a bloody shaft!"

A shrill, peculiar whistle rung forth, and in answer to it, a half-score men advanced, and as the mob scattered to either side, the selected worthies stooped and lifted a long, heavy beam of wood, provided with stout slings at regular intervals, through which were thrus' short bars by which the men controlled the battering-ram.

While they were balancing this and making their holds more certain, Arthur Cavendish muttered in Pendy's ear:

"Make sure of Thompson Hurd. He must never have a chance to peach. The others will die game, but he would split, sure!"

A hard, grim smile curled the blonde mustache of the love-mad gambler, while his blue eyes seemed to be of the hue of blood. Little fear that he would make a mistake, when so much depended upon his success.

Another shrill whistle, then the men bearing the battering-ram charged straight for the front door of the shanty.

A little spout of flame streamed out from the side of the shack, where a crack allowed the protrusion of a pistol-muzzle; but in their haste, the road-agents aimed wild, for not a man dropped. Once, twice more came that spout of fire and the spiteful report; but on rushed the men with the ram, without check or fall. On—and with a splintering crash, the door of the cabin went down before the first shock, the men whose sturdy arms guided the blow, tumbling half across the threshold with wild yells of mingled exultation and rage.

The interior of the shanty was now one blaze of fire as the road-agents rapidly worked their pistols. Shouts, curses and wild screams rent the air as the mob rushed forward and fairly swamped the building, while high above all rung out the shrill tones of Arthur Cavendish:

"Take them alive! Don't cheat the rope of its dues!"

Just how it came about, would be difficult to explain with anything like clearness, but a few breathless seconds later, the mad scramble came to an end. Still masked, but with their garments half torn from their persons, the three road agents were dragged from the cabin, strong hands fastened on each limb, disarmed, prisoners, but still living.

Then—a hoarse, maddened curse rent the air, and Dave Pendy, hatless, blood streaming over his white face, dashed from the building into the open, glaring savagely around, screaming:

"Hell and furies! Where is the cursed dog? Where is Tom Hurd? If he has escaped—"

Sure enough, where was the assassin? In the midst of a sudden silence, the citizens of Tight Squeeze glared around them, looking for the man who was then miles distant, fleeing to save his justly forfeited life.

As Dave Pendy fairly choked with rage, Cavendish yelled:

"Scatter and hunt him down! He must be near! A thousand dollars for the murderer, dead or alive!"

Like magic the mob sprung into life and motion, save a few who dragged the three road-agents away between them as though resolved to place them where escape would be impossible.

Foot by foot the ground was gone over. Far and near the mob searched for their victim; but when the gray light of a new day came, they were forced to acknowledge that their quest was all in vain. And then, all the more savage and bloodthirsty for this disappointment, they called for the road-agents, swinging noosed ropes over their heads.

Only to be stupefied by another shock. The road-agents were missing! No one had seen them after that mad rush after Thompson Hurd. And the mob began to suspect the truth: that the gang of King Philip had "played them for suckers!"

CHAPTER XXII.

PISTOL JOHNNY REDEEMS HIS PLEDGE.

TIGHT SQUEEZE would hardly have made an agreeable impression on a stranger, had one such chanced to have dropped into the lively little mining-camp that morning. It was savage and surly, sour and snappish, like the traditional bear with a sore head, or better yet—a man after a prolonged "racket," in which he caught sight of the "old gentleman with the poker," and hastily "sobered off" for fear of worse. Result, a terribly "swelled head," and a very qualmish stomach, with a sulky longing to fight whoever crosses the path; a toss-up, as to whether it would be better to "run amok," or "leave the world and climb a tree."

The "big circus" was over, and Tight Squeeze was becoming painfully conscious that she had

been "played dirt," by the very persons in whom she had placed her implicit trust for that particular occasion. A night of wild excitement, given over to incendiary speeches and bloodthirsty threats; a cabin demolished after a pompous siege; great waste of powder and much time spent in shaping true hangman's knots in trail ropes—with what result? Not a throat stretched—not a bullet planted where it would do the most good—not a single "dead man for breakfast," nor a prisoner to show for all their trouble.

Let the true story of that night's work leak out, and the fingers of scorn would be pointed at them from every direction—and each finger dipped in ridicule, at that!

Little wonder that Tight Squeeze was in a ferment; small marvel that her citizens, high and low, rude and polished, instead of retiring to their virtuous couches after their exhaustive all-night session, gathered in little knots about the streets, their short, crisp sentences consisting almost wholly of words tabooed by polite literature; for had not their careful "clean-up" failed to show a single "color"?

Tansy Dick alone appeared to have business on hand, as he rapidly passed from one little knot to another, pausing only long enough to drop a few hasty words among them; and his usually merry countenance showed how little heart there was in his present occupation; for a more doleful, disgusted face could not have been found in all Tight Squeeze that morn.

"Drap 'round to the hotel, boys; you're wanted."

That, and nothing more; but in their present state of demoralized dubiety, this brusque communication was sufficient to rally the little groups into one big one, before the steps of the Grand Central Hotel.

As the crowd gathered, so their curiosity increased. Many were the questions propounded by each fresh accession, but no one seemed able to give a satisfactory answer, until all eyes were arrested by the appearance of a single man in the door of the hotel. A stranger to the majority, but as he came into full view, he was recognized and the name of Pistol Johnny rose on the fresh air morning air—in more than one instance coupled with threats and fierce curses.

His face pale as that of a corpse, but without the slightest sign of fear or trembling, Pistol Johnny folded his arms across his breast and standing on the top step, waited until that sudden, ominous growling subsided.

"Gentlemen," he said, his voice hard and cold, betraying not the slightest trace of emotion; "I requested your presence here on a matter of business. I owe you an explanation of the part I played in the events of the night just past—"

"Whar you played us fer suckers an' jest piled dirt onto us, durn ye!" angrily cried Tom Griffin.

"Go putt your head to soak, ye 'tarnal squealer!" howled Tansy Dick, shooting out one bony fist and knocking the grumbling ex-guard heels over head through the crowd. "You're al'ays chuckin' in your lip whar it ain't wanted! An' thar's a heap more whar that come from, ef ary other gent thinks he wants fer to cut Pistol Johnny short off ag'in afore he gits through doin' his speech—you hear the ole man talk?"

Honest Tansy scowling most ferociously backed up to the lower step, standing there with hands on revolver butts, ready to fight the crowd in behalf of his new friend and mate.

A faint smile flashed across the pale face of the little sport, but that was the only trace of emotion called forth by that act of devoted partisanship.

"Have patience, gentlemen; I'll not detain you long. When I am through, then you can have your innings."

"By chance, I captured a man who had just dyed his hands in the heart's blood of one of your citizens. I thought it my duty as a white man, to protect him agai. st those among you who wished to lynch him out of hand. I begged for a brief reprieve, promising to give him over for trial in the morning, and when you hesitated, I pledged my word of honor that if by any chance he escaped from my custody, I would take his place and assume all of his responsibilities. The murderer did escape, and in accordance with my word, I am here to surrender myself to be dealt with as you may decide. But in doing so, I ask one favor at your hands."

"I knowed it was comin'," cried one from the crowd, with a coarse, contemptuous laugh. "It showed up too good at the fust-off fer to be any more then a blind lead!"

"He wants to beg off, and plead bankruptcy!"

A hot flush passed across the face of the cool sport at these words, and his hands dropped to the belt of arms which encircled his waist. The action caused a sudden commotion among the crowd, but instead of drawing a weapon, Pistol Johnny unbuckled the belt and flung it into the street, then produced a pair of handcuffs, snapping them around his wrists, holding his arms up where all could see, his cold voice uttering:

"Does that look as though I wanted to sneak

out of the responsibility I voluntarily assumed? Since you refuse to hear my explanation, I surrender myself for trial in place of Thompson Hurd. Select the men you can trust to act as guards, and let's have it over with!"

Tansy Dick whipped out a brace of revolvers and covered the swaying crowd, shouting fiercely:

"Pick them that's fittest fer to die, then! I'll salivate the fust dirty cuss that lifts a finger ag'in' my pard!"

Even as he spoke, two figures appeared close behind the self-captured sport, one armed with revolvers, the other provided with still more effective weapons—a fair woman's tears and pleadings!

"You can't harm this gentleman while I can pull trigg'r! He risked his life in our defense yesterday—"

"And saved me from worse than death!" cried Zora Tiffany as she glided forward and placed one hand gently on the arm of the startled sport. "In the name of your mothers, your sisters, your wives and sweethearts, gentlemen, I ask you to hear me! I pledge you my word—"

"Take her away," muttered Pistol Johnny, turning to Woody Wilkinson, who was no less surprised than himself at the sudden appearance of the maiden. "Tais is no place or sight for a gentle lady like her! Take her away, and leave me to fight my own battles."

With gentle force, Wilkinson caught his betrothed around the waist and bore her back into the house, just as a fresh sensation greeted the excited crowd.

Dressed in the same rich suit which she wore when she held that peculiar interview with Pistol Johnny the evening before, Daisy Darling shot through the crowd and took up her position beside Tansy Dick, a revolver cocked in each white and jeweled hand, her face richly flushed, her jetty eyes glowing with a keen, deadly light as she cried:

"Keep your tongues between your teeth, bulldogs! If Pistol Johnny wants to preach to you from now until sundown, he's going to have the chance, unless you've grit enough to cut us down in our prime for a nosegay—Tansy and Daisy!"

A laugh followed this reckless remark, but it was faint and only half-hearted. The crowd was in a surly, dangerous mood, and the woman sport saw that she had miscalculated her personal influence. Her teeth came together with a sharp, menacing click, and her face hardened until it seemed aged by a dozen years. Her voice was metallic rather than musical, though her words were in the same light vein:

"It is not often that I take the trouble to put my finger into a pie that is not of my own baking, but really I am not going to stand quietly by and see such a nice, handsome sport spoiled by hanging! Men are not so plenty in these diggings that you can afford to waste them after that fashion!"

"A purty man to hide behind the pettycuts of a woman!" came a sneer from the crowd.

"And you're a sweet-scented duck to dare express your opinion of a white man, Tangle-leg!" flashed Daisy Darling, spotting the speaker and covering him with a pistol. "Gentlemen, do you put that drunken, lazy bummer and thief to speak for you?"

A chorus of indignant denials broke out, and the luckless wretch was kicked and buffeted from side to side, while Daisy Darling adroitly improved her advantage:

"Thank you, gentlemen! Now let's talk business. Thompson Hurd has escaped, but will it bring him to justice if you take and stretch the neck of Pistol Johnny instead? I am only a woman, it is true, but even I would not be guilty of such a miserable blunder as that!"

"Instead, my decision would be this: Let Pistol Johnny go free, on his parole, for two weeks. Let him devote that length of time to hunting Thompson Hurd down and bringing him back here to pay the just penalty of his crimes. If, at the end of that period, Pistol Johnny fails to capture the fugitive, let him pledge his word of honor to return and surrender himself once more, to meet whatever fate you may decide."

"Do this, and I'll call you the pure white article. Refuse—persist in hanging the gentleman—and though you may possibly succeed in the end, it will be when I am dead! For you can't hang a friend of mine while I have a bullet left in these little tools!"

"Me too!" echoed Tansy Dick, with grim determination.

Still the crowd wavered. The shameful way in which they had been tricked on the night just past, rendered them very hard to deal with. They were hungry for blood, and they cared little whether it came from innocent or guilty veins.

During all this, Pistol Johnny remained quietly awaiting an opportunity to make himself heard, and now he caught at it, his voice cold and even as though he possessed not the faintest interest in the curious dispute.

"Gentlemen, I am ready whenever you care to come for me. I did not ask these kind friends to interfere in my behalf, nor are they doing so

with my consent. I ask you to listen to my explanation, then I pledge you my word that I will disarm my self-appointed champions, and quietly submit to whatever punishment you may decree. Have I your permission to go on?"

He paused for a reply, but nothing distinct enough to be understood came from the crowd. With a slight smile, he bowed low, then spoke, rapidly, clearly:

"When I undertook to defend the man you know as Thompson Hurd, I had not recognized him for what he really proved to be; the bitterest, most dastardly enemy man ever was cursed with. When I did recognize him, I came near strangling him to death in my mad fury, but Tansy Dick interfered, and saved his life for then—"

"Fer which I'm goin' to hire a man to kick me clean from one eend o' town to the other, jest as soon as I kin find time!" exclaimed the stage-driver, in utter disgust.

"The story is too long to tell in all its details," added Pistol Johnny, his voice growing harder. "Enough that, while I had sworn to kill the demon with my own hands, I was also bound to let him live until I discovered a secret he bore with him. He refused to confess. You would hang him in the morning, despite all I could say or do. There was only one course for me to follow, and that one I took. I set him free, loaning him his life, swearing to claim it again as soon as I could penetrate his secret."

"I did this with my eyes open, remembering the solemn pledge I gave you last night. I might have fled during the confusion, but I did not. I came here, sent Tansy Dick out to collect you, and now—I am your prisoner, to do with as you think best."

"If that ain't white talk, then I'm a hairless and cappy old maid!" cried Daisy Darling, with more force than elegance. "Put it to vote, gentlemen! Those in favor of hanging Pistol Johnny for being a square, honest man of his word, will step forward and hold up their right hands—and by the heavens above! I'll kill the first man that does it!"

With marvelous stiffness came this addition, uttered in a tone that told how surely the woman sport would keep her threat. The crowd, reckless, sullen though those composing it were, stood as though petrified, not one caring to invited certain death, even for the sake of hanging Pistol Johnny.

A mocking, triumphant laugh bubbled from those red lips, and Daisy Darling skipped up the steps as she cried:

"Not a vote for hanging! A thousand thanks, gentlemen! I'll see you later—and in the mean time, just tell the boys that Dandy Darling takes all the locks off his liquor barrels for the next ten hours! Drink hearty, while you may!"

Pistol Johnny hesitated, and seemed about to speak to the crowd, when Daisy Darling whispered in his ear:

"Don't be a fool and throw away your last chance! Follow me when the crowd scatters, and I'll put you on the track of Marcia Hurd—"

"What do you know of her?" hoarsely demanded the man, his eyes glowing, his face pale as that of a corpse.

"I know that if you delay an hour, you'll never meet her again on this earth!" was the low, sharp response.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"AFTER MANY YEARS."

ALL save a few of the more malignant "soreheads" among them were glad of so good an excuse for breaking ranks as this generous offer of free liquor, for they began to see that Pistol Johnny had friends who would fight hard in his behalf, however willing the sport himself might be to surrender quietly to take the consequences of his past action. Never yet had the citizens of Tight Squeeze placed themselves in open opposition to Daisy Darling, nor did they care to do so now, knowing how little credit there was to be won in fighting a woman. And some among them doubtless remembered that the pet sport of Tight Squeeze had an inconvenient habit of using the weapons she carried, when "crowded."

Daisy Darling held Pistol Johnny tightly by the arm as she watched the rapid melting away of the crowd. Then she left him and lightly ran down to where faithful Tansy Dick still stood on guard, picking up the discarded pistol-belt, then, before the doughty stage-driver could anticipate her action, stretching up and planting a resounding smack direct on his bearded lips!

"Don't tell anybody I did it, you blessed old sinner!" she laughed gayly, as Tansy stood fairly petrified with amazement and confusion. "You're white, and if you weren't so blessed ugly, I'd make love to you like a house afire!"

At a swift glance from her, and a silent motion from her hand, Pistol Johnny came down from the hotel steps and was following, when Tansy Dick interposed:

"Mought as well unlock them bracelets, pard. It was a turrible fool trick your puttin' 'em on in the fust place, but I reckon it's come out all right."

With the key, Tansy removed the handcuffs. Pistol Johnny took the belt of arms from Daisy, buckling it around his waist as he moved on by her side, Tansy keeping close on the other.

"See you later, old gent," bowed Daisy significantly; but despite that thrilling kiss, Tansy was not to be beguiled.

"I'm goin' along," he said doggedly. "They ain't no more durn tricks goin' to be played onto my pard, ef I kin holp it. You may be on the squar', or you mayn't. I see'd you in the rumpus las' night, which got us into all this dirty pickle."

The black eyes glowed ominously for a moment, but then the woman sport turned to Pistol Johnny, saying sharply:

"Tansy is too honest for me to answer him as his insolence deserves, but if he *will* follow, I'll down him, sure! Bid him turn back, or you'll never see Marcia Ranney again!"

Pistol Johnny, ever since that hastily breathed communication on the steps of the hotel, seemed like one acting under mesmeric influence, and now he turned upon Tansy Dick, saying:

"You hear the lady, pard? She objects to your company just now. Oblige me by turning back, will you?"

An injured look came over that honest face as the little sport uttered those hard, short sentences, and as he caught a half-laugh on the face of Daisy Darling, he muttered:

"I ain't the sort that crowd in on them what don't want my comp'ny—but you kin jest mark this down: I'm goin' to keep a eye onto the house, an' of the boss don't come out in a reasonable len'th o' time, I'm goin' fer to know the reason why, ef it takes a wheel!"

With a short, careless laugh, Daisy Darling slipped her little hand through the arm of the cool sport, and they walked along in silence until the house where the woman sport lived was reached.

Pistol Johnny followed her into the building without the slightest hesitation, pausing on the broaden trap as Daisy Darling faced him after closing the door.

"You told me you could place me on the track of—of Marcia Ranney," he said, hoarsely, something rising in his throat and forcing him to make a spasmodic gulp before he could pronounce that name. "Where is she? If you have brought me here to play on my feelings—beware! I'll forget your sex and kill you like I would a mad dog!"

For a barely perceptible space the woman sport hesitated, and a peculiar, ominous glitter filled her black eyes as her right foot moved a few inches toward the concealed spring by means of which she could send Pistol Johnny down to certain death; but then she glided close to him, lightly tapping his lips with the tip of one finger as she whispered:

"Promise me that you will be cautious—that you will not lose your nerve even for a moment. I can trust you?"

Pistol Johnny bowed in silence. He dared not trust his voice just then. Something in the tone and look of Daisy Darling, rather than aught her words conveyed, sent the blood leaping wildly through his veins and caused his brain to reel and all before him to grow confused and indistinct.

He was vaguely conscious that the woman sport took him by the hand and led him across the room to the same point where she had vanished on the evening before, leaving him to fight silently against what he then believed was certain death. He knew that she silently parted the brilliant hangings, then motioned him to gaze through the opening.

Like one in a dream, he obeyed.

He saw another room, small but neatly arranged. It contained a white-draped bed, upon which the subdued light from a curtained window stremmed. And on that bed—

A gasping, choking cry bubbled up in his throat, as his hand closed on the shoulder of his guide with a force that almost buried his fingers in the flesh.

"Dead—my poor girl—my Marcia!"

So it seemed. The motionless form of a woman lay on the bed, with thin hands folded across her breast. Her haggard, yet still beautiful face was white as that of a corpse—and a corpse she seemed, until that hoarse, gurgling cry broke the silence of the chamber.

Then—her large, sunken eyes opened and turned languidly toward the opening. One moment of doubt—a bewildered cry—then she reached out her thin arms toward them!

Trembling, awe-stricken, still doubting the evidence of his senses, Pistol Johnny slowly entered the chamber, his head bowing as he fell on his knees by the bed, his form quivering like a leaf in a storm.

With folded arms Daisy Darling stood framed in the rich drapery, a smile upon her red lips. Was it born of pleasure at having thus brought together those whom a cruel fate had divided for long, weary years? Or was it because she saw that the marvelous nerve of the sport was broken at last?

"Thank Heaven! you have come in time for me to beg your forgiveness, John!" murmured the woman, tremblingly touching his bowed

head with one wan hand. "I feared we would never meet again, and that made death seem very bitter to me. I prayed that you might be brought to me—that you might murmur your forgiveness for the wrongs you have suffered through me, over my corpse if not into my living ears. John—"

He shook like a man in an ague-fit at the first sound of her voice, but then as his name was so tenderly, so appealingly pronounced, he could doubt no longer, and with a wild, choking sob, he lifted his head. Their eyes met—the black and dreadful past seemed wiped away for the moment, and his strong arms stole around her feebly-rising form, drawing her close to his heaving bosom—then their lips met in a long, clinging kiss.

And then, forgetful that their words were overheard, forgetful of the dark eyes that were watching their every movement, they spoke in broken accents of the past.

"I have prayed night and day for this blessed boon, John, though I began to fear that it would never be granted me," she murmured, her head resting on his breast, her thin fingers gently touching his face, here and there, with the same aimless caressing touch one sees in a sleepy, nursing child. "At one time it was my greatest dread—when I first began to realize how terribly you had been wronged. Then, the sight of your face would have killed me. Now, it is different. I can talk freely, because I am dying—"

"No, no, Marcia!" he muttered, his voice strained, his hand trembling as it lightly touched her lips. "You will get well—you will live, for me, and together we will forget the past. We will be even happier than if—"

"Too late, dear," she murmured with a faint sigh as her eyes closed wearily; "too late for all but this: Tell me that you do not hate me for the bitter wrong I done you—say that you forgive me my sins, and let me die at peace with all the world. I ask no more!"

"Marcia, listen," he said, his voice filled with intense earnestness as he drew his face a little back so that his eyes could look fairly upon her pale features. "I love you now, even as I loved you then—more devotedly if that can be! I tried to hate you when I learned that you had married another. I tried to curse you. I swore that I would be bitterly avenged upon you both. But even while that oath was hot on my lips, I knew that it was a lie! I knew that my love for you would never die—never burn itself out, even though you were lost to me forever—even as I read and re-read the lines in which you told me your heart had passed from my keeping to that of a veritable demon in human shape!"

Her eyes opened, a trace of color flashed back into her face, and with a strength which seemed given her for the purpose, she spoke to him rapidly, clearly:

"And I—my poor John!—lied when my hand traced those heartless words! Nay," as he would have kissed her again, "let me speak while I can. God has called me back from the grave that I might make all clear to you. Let me make my poor defense, that you may know your old friend just as she was!

"I was so young and foolish when we were first engaged—such a poor, weak, silly girl! And that—that man was so cunning, so artful, so plausible! I could not help believing him, when he gave me such seemingly convincing proofs of your deception. He did so with tears in his eyes, and made it appear as though I forced the words from his unwilling lips. And then, when his cunningly-laid snare entangled your feet—when you suffered arrest and imprisonment for his crime—his devilish arts made me believe I loved him—made me marry him and flee far away!"

"It was not long before I found him out. His end once won, he soon threw off his cunning mask, and showed his true colors. He taunted me with my credulity. He admitted that he committed the crime for which you suffered. I tried to escape from him time and again; but only to fail and receive more brutal treatment than ever at his hands. In my desperation and remorse, I wrote a full account of his admission and sent it to you at your place of confinement. He suspected the truth and brought me out here. Since then—I have suffered worse—than death! Only one hope upheld me—that of once more meeting you—and telling you the truth."

"John—say it once more! Say that I am forgiven!" she gasped, her voice suddenly growing faint, the color fading from her face, a shiver agitating her wasted frame.

"As I hope for forgiveness myself!" he muttered, clasping her sinking frame closely to his bosom and pressing his burning lips to hers—only for an instant.

With a shuddering cry, he drew his head back and gazed wildly into hers. One brief gleam from her eyes—a faint motion of her white lips—no more!

Pistol Johnny gently lowered her form to the pillow, then sunk on his knees beside the bed, burying his face in his hands.

For the woman he loved was no longer of this world.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PISTOL JOHNNY RENEWS HIS OATH.

HALF hidden among the gay-hued drapery, Daisy Darling stood and watched the meeting between those whom a perverse fate had so cruelly separated, only to bring them together again when one was marked by the signet of death. And now that there was no necessity for wearing a mask, her face and glittering eyes spoke more plainly than ever her tongue. Little of womanly tenderness or sympathy was to be discovered in either; instead, a malicious triumph, seemingly born of the fact that at last the truly marvelous nerve of this man had given way to emotions such as ordinary mortals might feel.

She watched them while that last embrace lasted; through the passionate kiss that was cut short by the coming of grim death; and the malicious smile grew more pronounced as Pistol Johnny gently lowered the lifeless clay back on the pillow, then bowed his head, his frame shaken by silent throes, all the more bitter because they were denied audible expression.

How long he remained thus, bowed beside his dead, Pistol Johnny never knew. It was the gentle touch of Daisy Darling on his shoulder that finally aroused him from the stupor of grief into which the death of Marcia Ranney cast him.

"Brace up, Pistol Johnny, and be a man!" were the first words that made their way to his temporarily benumbed brain. "Though the woman you loved is dead, there is yet vengeance for you to live for!"

A shudder ran over his frame, but he lifted his head and turned his face toward the woman sport. Strong though her nerves were, and blunted her sensibilities by the wild and lawless life she had led, Daisy Darling started back with a little exclamation of wonder and something closely akin to fright, as she beheld that face and noted the terrible change that had come over it during those few minutes.

Ghastly and livid as a corpse. Deep-lined and wrinkled. Aged as though by a full score of years. Eyes sunken deep into his head, glowing with a dull, yet scorching light. Nor was the alteration in his voice less startling:

"Dead—and I killed her!" he uttered, his voice hollow and terribly unnatural. "I killed her, when I would have given my whole life to lengthen hers but a single day!"

With a powerful effort of will, Daisy Darling conquered that shuddering repulsion which had come over her on witnessing the startling change in the once careless, handsome sport, and her hand closed on his arm, gently urging him from the chamber of death, as she said:

"No—you had nothing to do with her death. She was most cruelly murdered, and Thompson Hurd dealt the blow. I swear it! And if you will listen to me, I'll prove my words!"

Pistol Johnny stared at the speaker as though unable to comprehend her meaning; but her earnestness produced its desired effect, and he yielded to her wish, slowly following her to the outer room, the cloth screen falling behind them, and shutting off all view of the death-chamber.

At a sign from her, he sat down on the couch, his dull yet burning gaze fastened upon her face. She sat down beside him, and spoke rapidly, clearly, though she could not fairly encounter that strange gaze.

"It is now nearly two years since I first met the woman whom you called Marcia Ranney. Then she passed as Mrs. Hurd, wife of Thompson Hurd. It was through him that I made her acquaintance, and it was not long before I saw that he was leading her a life that was worse than death, making of this world a living hell to her.

"There is no need for me to enter into details. Knowing the wretch as you do—seeing the frightful alteration which has been wrought in the fair girl you loved so passionately—you can form your own judgment. Enough that he tortured her, body and soul, after every diabolical fashion his satanic ingenuity could invent. She tried to run away, for an angel could not have endured his brutality, but though he seemed to wish her death, he would not suffer her to escape him by flight.

"I need not tell you that Thompson Hurd was connected with the gang under King Philip, for you must have discovered that much long ago, but there are depths to his infamy, of which even you are ignorant.

"You remember the attempted stage robbery, which you so boldly frustrated? You heard something of a crazy woman who tried to warn the passengers of an ambuscade? That woman was the wife of Thompson Hurd!

"She discovered the fact that her husband belonged to the gang of King Philip. Somehow—this point she failed to fully explain to me—she overheard Hurd and some others plotting the stopping of the coach, not alone for the treasure which it might carry, but for a purpose that almost crazed her poor brain when she fully understood its details.

"Miss Zora Tiffany was one of the passengers. Her father was wealthy, and she was bringing him a very large sum of money in cash. She was to be captured by the gang,

and conveyed to their hiding-place somewhere among the hills. Thompson Hurd was to have the father kidnapped, and taken to the same place. By torturing him before the eyes of his daughter, she was to be forced into consenting to a marriage with Thompson Hurd. This accomplished, his wife was to be put out of the way, and the spoils divided between him and King Philip.

"Learning all this, the poor woman managed to steal away while Hurd was busied elsewhere, and more than half crazed, she endeavored to alarm the girl whose peace of mind was plotted against. Unfortunately for her, one of the band was in the stage for the purpose of aiding his fellows when the ambush was uncovered, and he frightened her away. He followed her to make sure that she created no more trouble; but somehow she contrived to escape from him. How, she seemed unable to tell me when I questioned her.

"Where she went or what happened after her flight from the stage, she could not clearly explain. Beyond a doubt she was insane for the time being, and wandered aimlessly through the hills, until habit or something similar, led her back to camp, for the next she remembered with any distinctness was her coming face to face with Thompson Hurd under the moonlight, not many rods from this house.

"Doubtless it was immediately after you set him at liberty, though by some means he had gained possession of a knife. In her surprise at meeting him, she cried out and called him by name. He replied by a fierce oath, and struck her down, then renewed his flight.

"I was one of those who demanded the surrender of your prisoners, but I cared little for any save Thompson Hurd. For reasons which do not concern you, I desired his death, and when the attack was finally made, I sought for him alone. As you know, he was gone, and our search was in vain.

"It was while I was looking for him that I stumbled over the body of his wife, who lay where he had buried her. I recognized the poor creature, and finding she was still alive, I managed to carry her here, unaided, and worked over her until I restored her to consciousness."

Pistol Johnny caught her hand and raised it to his lips. The woman sport snatched it away hastily, with a darting glance into his eyes.

"No, no—you have no occasion to thank me!"

"You were kind to her. I will never forget that," he said, his voice husky and uncertain.

"She was a woman, and I—bah!" with a hard, metallic laugh that sounded strangely out of place, then and there. "If you knew all, you would curse, rather than bless me!"

"Never that," was the more composed reply, as the gray eyes looked steadily into hers, until the black orbs drooped again. "You may be anything but an angel for aught I can say; but this one deed of kindness is sufficient to cover a multitude of sins in my sight. You were kind and pitying toward my poor Marcia—may Heaven bless and prosper you for that!"

Her face was averted, as though to conceal her emotion as Pistol Johnny uttered these fervent words; but a triumphant smile curled her red lips and there was a treacherous light in her jetty eyes that might have betrayed her had Pistol Johnny caught a glimpse of her face just then.

Only for a moment; then she faced him again, her face composed, her voice smooth and even, her eyes downcast.

"Let me finish my story, for time is passing, and with each minute Thompson Hurd is putting more ground behind him.

"I brought Marcia Ranney here, and when she recovered her consciousness, she told me what had happened. She felt that she was dying, and she begged that I would set her right in the estimation of one man, if ever chance should bring us together. Then she told me the story of her past. I did not recognize the man she called John, for the last name was different from the one you gave as yours; but I made her the promise she asked, and the poor thing sank into a peaceful sleep, my hand clasped in hers.

"I gently slipped it away, feeling that she would not require any immediate attention, and stole out to learn what was being done. I came just in time to hear you declare Thompson Hurd your bitter foe, and then the whole truth flashed across my mind—you were the man I had promised to find, for her!

"You know what followed. You came here in time to forgive and be forgiven; to receive her dying words—"

"And murder her by my mad passion!" muttered the man.

"Not so. She was dying when you came. Only a miracle could have saved her life. Come! I will show you what caused her death!" cried Daisy Darling, rising and grasping his hand, leading him back to the death-chamber.

She dropped his hand as the bedside was gained, and bending so that her own body cut off his view, turned back the coverlet, removed a bloody bandage, then stood aside.

A ghastly wound was visible directly over the heart.

"Thompson Hurd dealt that blow!" slowly

uttered the woman sport, as Pistol Johnny started back with a hoarse cry. "He drove his knife home, then fled, leaving her for dead!"

For a moment Pistol Johnny stood staring at the ghastly cut, trembling like a leaf. Then, with a suddenness that was remarkable, his nerves grew steeled, and stepping forward, he gently touched the wound, then raised his blood-stained right hand on high, his eyes uplifted, his lips slightly moving, though not an audible sound issued from them.

Then he touched his lips with the bloody fingers, and with the stain upon them, turned to Daisy Darling, his voice cold and steady as he uttered:

"I leave her to your care. As you are a woman and hope for mercy hereafter, see that she is given decent burial."

"And you?" softly uttered the woman sport.

"Go to find Ishmael Black. I loaned him a life, but the time to reclaim it has now come. When I find him, her foul assassination shall be terribly avenged."

Stooping, Pistol Johnny touched his lips to the pale brow of the dead, then turned on his heel and passed out of the room. In equal silence Daisy Darling followed, opening the outer door for him, watching him stride swiftly away, a peculiar smile curling her lips as she muttered:

"Look out for yourself, Thompson Hurd! I'd rather have a tribe of cannibals on my trail than that one man! And you, my gallant Jack o' the Double Six! Go your way! While busied with *him*, you will not interfere with *my* schemes. And when you have killed Tom Hurd, you will be mighty apt to find a grave awaiting *your* coming—ha! ha! ha!"

CHAPTER XXV.

INTO THE SNARE.

TAKING into consideration the fact that liquor flowed freely and without price in Tight Squeeze that day, the mining camp was remarkably quiet and free from disturbance. There seemed to be a spell of some sort cast over the citizens, and from a howling pandemonium the little burg became a very model of propriety for the time being.

Tansy Dick kept his word, and never took his eyes from the building in which he saw Pistol Johnny disappear in company with the woman sport, until he emerged safe and sound. The honest stage-driver hastened to meet him, but the words that rose to his lips never found utterance. The startling change which that one brief hour had wrought in the face of the cool sport literally struck him dumb. But his demoralization was complete when Pistol Johnny turned abruptly on him, and in cold, stern tones, bade him go his own way.

"I have a sacred duty to perform, and no hand save mine can touch it. Go your way and forget that you ever knew me. You are a good and true man, but if you attempt to follow me any further, I will kill you like a dog!"

There was naught of anger, nothing of impatience or dislike in the voice with which he uttered these words; but Tansy Dick felt all the more impressed by them. Hurt, frightened, in a measure stupefied, he watched until he saw the sport ride out of Tight Squeeze on his white mule.

"Ef the Ole Boy hisself ain't stirrin' up this little pot o' mush, then I'm a howlin' liar!" he muttered, spitting over one shoulder in utter disgust. "'Nother good man gone clean crazy! Durn an' double durn the hell kit an' b'ilin', anyway! I'm gein' to git so p'izen drunk I won't know my head from a hole in the ground—so *thar!*"

It was an unsatisfactory day to more than the worthy stage-driver. By fits and starts little squads of men would set out with most portentous scowls, breathing terrible threats against those graceless rascals who had so shamefully cheated the hangman of his dues on the past night; with very different demeanor, they or other squads would return, empty-handed, chap fallen, making haste to drown their bitter disappointment in the flowing bowl—or its contents.

Even less at ease was Woody Wilkinson. Though he had not dared ask any pointed questions concerning the affairs of his friend and employer, Felix Tiffany, after the caution conveyed him in that mysterious note, he had heard enough to know that the old gentleman had fallen into some serious, if not suspicious difficulty.

He was forced to conceal this from Zora, besides calming her increasing fears, and guarding her from catching any of those damaging rumors which seemed to be flying all over the hotel. With all this, and waiting, watching for the promised communication, it may be imagined the young man took little rest or comfort in life.

The long, anxious day drew to an end, and feeling that there was little chance of hearing from Felix Tiffany before another day, at the best, Woody Wilkinson was leaving the hotel-bar to pay his betrothed a visit, when he heard his name spoken, and wheeling quickly, was

just in time to see the landlord pointing in his direction.

A short, burly, roughly-dressed man of middle age moved toward him, keenly scanning his face with a pair of black, piercing eyes that seemed to penetrate far below the surface.

"You were asking for me?" hurriedly uttered Wilkinson.

"Ef your name is Woody Wilkinson, mebbe I was," guardedly answered the stranger.

"It is—you have a message for me, from—"

Something in those glittering eyes cut him short and the eager query was left unfinished. Softly, without moving the shaggy, weather-stained hair that covered his lips, the stranger muttered:

"Let names slide. Ef you're the man I reckon, thar's another with ye that would like to hear what I kin tell. Ef you know whar we three kin talk without bein' listened to, git thar as soon's ye know how."

Doubting no longer, Wilkinson signed for the stranger to follow, and led the way upstairs. Knocking at the door of the room occupied by Zora Tiffany, she opened it, starting back with a little cry as she noticed a stranger.

In a hurried whisper Woody reassured her, and bidding the man enter, he closed and locked the chamber-door after them.

"You bring us a message?" he asked, a little uneasily.

"Mebbe I do, an' mebbe it's fer somebody else. Ef you'd sorter hint who it was you was lookin' fer a word from, mebbe I could tell better," grinned the stranger.

"From papa!" impulsively cried Zora, her pale face growing eager, yet fearful. "Tell me—where is he? What has happened? Why does he not come to me?"

"Your pap hed a name, I reckon? An' he give you one?"

"If you come from Mr. Felix Tiffany, say so!" impatiently interposed Wilkinson. "This is his daughter, Zora."

"I reckon it's all hunky, then. Any way, them is the names the old gent told me."

"Where is he? What message did he send?"

"Jest a bit o' paper—that!" and the messenger, with a swift, wary glance around the room, drew a folded and sealed note from beneath his clothes, but eluding the young man's eager grasp. "He said fer me to give it to the gal—*thar!*"

With trembling fingers Zora tore it open and hurriedly glanced over the contents, Wilkinson breathlessly watching her swiftly changing countenance. With a little gasping breath, she handed him the paper.

As with the message found in the room on their arrival at the hotel, this contained neither address nor signature:

"The trusty friend who hands you this, brought me information of your safe arrival. Doubtless you have learned all—but I beg of you to reserve your judgment until we meet and I can explain how little I am to blame for what has happened, black as the case must look, even to you!"

"Come to me at once, but come secretly, and make sure that no one is dogging you to discover my present place of hiding. Bring nothing but *valuables with you*. for our flight must be swift and unimpeded. I only wait for you—I will wait until you come, though every hour but deepens my risk and lessens my chance of escape."

"You can place implicit trust in the man who brings you this note. He will provide means for your making the journey with ease and rapidity. Come—to your miserable parent!"

Wilkinson stared for a brief space at the paper after he read the last word, thoroughly perplexed and at a loss to fully comprehend its meaning. What had happened to cause Felix Tiffany to steal away and lie in concealment? It was all a bewildering enigma!"

"You know who sent this note?" he asked the messenger, eying him keenly. "You know what it contains?"

"I don't know nothin' but jess this," was the slow, dogged reply: "A gent told me to give it to the lady who would say her name was Zora Tiffany. I was to wait ontel she read what was writ inside. Then I was to ax her to foller me. Ef she come, I was to take her back to whar I left the old gent. Ef a man named Woody Wilkinson was with her, I was to say that the old gent looked fer him too. I was to git horses fer you to ride. I was to wait ontel dark afore I spoke to you. I was to make sure they didn't nobody but the two what he named find out anythin' I was 'bout. That's all I know."

"But where is he? How far from here?"

"That you'll find out when we git thar. The old gent didn't give me orders to tell you that."

"I will go wi h you, but the lady shall remain here until I can return for her, if I find it is all right."

"Good night," gruffly muttered the man, turning on his heel as though to take his departure, when Woody interposed:

"What do you mean?" he cried, angrily.

"Where are you going?"

"Look here, *you*," snapped the messenger, wheeling again, his black eyes glittering. "The

old gent promised me big money ef I brung you two to him, safe an' sound. Ef I failed, I wasn't to git a durned cent. I ain't goin' to run no resks. It mought suit him jest as well fer to hev you come on alone an' fust, but I don't know it. He didn't say that. He did say fetch 'em all two both, an' I'll pay you a heap cases. Ef you go, I'll take you to him. Ef you won't go, then I jump the game, go in fer a he-ole drunk, an' let the old gent wrastle fer his own self. Them's me—chuck up fer keeps!"

Zora tremblingly caught her lover by the arm.

"Do not anger him, Woody. Father trusted him, and surely we can do the same. We must! He said for us to come without delay. If we fail him now, it may be his ruin."

"But if he meant no harm, why does he refuse to speak out plainly? Why refuse to tell us where your father is?"

"Ca'se he goes by orders, an' he hain't got none fer to tell you a word more then he's said a'ready," quietly retorted the stranger. "Right or wrong, you got to take me as I be, or throw the hull business over your shoulder. I ain't dead sure you're the critters he sent me fer. Mebbe it's a trick set up by them the ole gent is hidin' from. Mebbe you want to find out jest whar he is, an' then lay me by the heels while you git up your crowd an' go fer him. I ain't sayin' this is the game you're tryin' fer to play, but it mought be, an' I ain't takin' no odds when I kin git along better without 'em."

"Come with me, you two. I reckon I'm smart enough fer to make sure that they don't nobody else track us. Ef they try it on, they'll mebbe ketch up with you—but you won't be of any great use to them, *then!*"

"What do you mean by that?" sharply demanded Wilkinson.

"That I'll blow you chuck full o' holes afore you kin say Jack Robinson, the minnit I see you're tryin' to play me dirt. That's the words with the bark on, but ef you're on the squar', you won't take 'em amiss. The ole gent trusted me, an' them as does me that I'll use white, ef it takes a leg!"

Wilkinson was closely watching the stranger through this blunt interchange of words, and there was something in his bearing and voice that convinced him the messenger was really all that he claimed; rude and blunt, 'tis true, but a faithful friend to the old gentleman at bottom, after all.

Still, he did not like the idea of taking Zora on a wild night ride, and made on more effort to shake the resolution of the stranger:

"I believe you are what you claim, and am willing to go with you; but it will prove more than the lady can bear. Take me to where your employer said, and I will give you any reward you may ask. Surely that is fair?"

"Fair, but 'tain't the orders I'm actin' under. Both or neither. Suit yourself. I ain't another word to say."

Quietly as he spoke, Wilkinson saw that nothing could alter his determination, and when Zora, clinging tremblingly to his arm, begged him to hesitate no longer on her account, he yielded and they hastily made their preparations for following the messenger.

He left the hotel first, lingering outside until they appeared, then gliding silently through the town toward the pine-sprinkled hills to the north. Keeping him plainly in sight, the young couple hastened on, casting many an anxious glance around and behind them, to make sure that no curious or unfriendly spies were dogging their footsteps.

"Here we be!" muttered the guide, pausing at the edge of a small but dense grove, half a mile from Tight Squeeze. "Wait a bit ontel I make sure they ain't nobody follerin' of us."

Sinking nearly to the ground, he glided silently away in the direction of the town, passing to and fro until assured that no one was skulking along their trail, then returning.

"It's all right, so fur," he muttered with a grin of satisfaction as the moonlight fell athwart his rugged countenance. "When we once git in the saddle, and hev a fair start, thar won't be no more resk, I don't reckon."

Plunging into the grove, he soon reappeared, leading three horses by the bridles, apologizing as Zora glanced at them:

"Tain't jest the sort o' riggin' you're used to, I don't reckon, miss; but a side-saddle don't grow on every bush out this-a-way, an' the sight o' one would set ev'rybody to axin' questions an' to watchin' fer what it all meant."

"I can manage very well. Only, let us make haste!"

Wilkinson aided her to mount, and arrange herself as comfortably as the circumstances would admit, then leaped into his own saddle and bade the man to lead on.

Rapidly they rode, covering mile after mile in utter silence, save for the clinking of their horses' hoofs against the stones. Neither cared to speak. The mystery which shrouded the actions of Felix Tiffany troubled them too much for idle speech. They longed for, even while dreading, the time to come when all might be once more made clear.

For hour after hour they rode on through the broken ground, their guide leading them without the slightest pause or hesitation, though at times the overhanging rocks made all around them black as a polar midnight. He seemed strangely familiar w^th the route, but all their doubts were long since forgotten, and not a suspicion of evil occurred to them as he finally drew rein and uttered a shrill whistle, saying:

"Don't git skeered. It's jest to let the old gent know we've got here at last, an'—down him, lads!"

Half a dozen dark figures leaped up around them, and before Wilkinson cou'd draw a weapon or strike a blow, a crushing stroke from a pistol-butt knocked him from his horse!

CHAPTER XXVI.

DAVE PENDY'S EYES ARE OPENED.

JUST as the sun was sinking to rest, Dave Pendy entered Tight Squeeze from the east, walking wearily, slowly, looking like a man who was "all broken up," as one of his associates afterward remarked.

He wore no hat, having lost this when the door of the temporary prison went down that night, and his clothing was tattered and soiled. A blood-stained handkerchief was tied around his face, as though the wearer had been wounded. Taken all in all, Dave Pendy looked as though he had seen rough service since his interview with Daisy Darling.

He paused irresolutely as he came to the turning which led to the hotel on the right, to the house occupied by the woman sport on the left; but his hesitation was of brief duration, and then he quickened his steps until he reached the little building which contained all he loved in life.

His knuckles had barely left the door, when it was opened and the bright, sparkling countenance of Daisy Darling confronted him. A sharp little cry of mingled wonder and delight broke from her lips, and her white hand caught him by the shoulder, almost pulling him inside the room.

"At last! but better late than never, Davy, lad!" she uttered, half-laughing, as she closed the door behind him, its spring-lock working clearly. "I've been waiting and watching for you all this long day, yet you caught me napping at last! You poor rascal!" as she seemed to note his sadly dilapidated condition for the first time. "You look as though you had been mighty poorly stayed with! Where have you been, and what have you done?"

A warm flush came into the worn and haggard features of the love-mad gambler, for even in his most sanguine moments he had not dared to anticipate such an interested greeting. The poor devil fancied it was born of real joy at his safe return, instead of the tidings which he might have to report.

"I'm hungry and worn out, Daisy," he muttered, the love-light springing up more vividly in his bloodshot eyes. "I could travel no longer without rest and food. I came back to camp to pick up a little, and learn what the other boys had done. You are so good! I feared you would be angry and blow me up for not succeeding better."

Even as he uttered the words, Dave Pendy grew pale again and shrank back a little, for that eager, ardent smile abruptly vanished, and the black eyes glittered still more vividly as the woman sport fell back a pace, one hand uplifted to wave him away, her voice ringing out hard and metallic:

"What do you mean, Dave Pendy? Speak out fair and square. Dare you come here and tell me to my face that you have made another botch of the job I set you?"

Worn and weary, faint from fatigue and hunger, the gambler was in poor condition to resist the beautiful virago, and his head drooped, his voice grew unsteady, as he muttered:

"I did the best I could, Daisy. The devil was not in the cabin when we carried it. I got a bullet through my cheek, but that didn't hinder my hunting for Thompson Hurd from then until now, without a minute's rest."

"Bah!" with stinging scorn in both face and voice. "You should have kept on until you run him to earth, or else dropped dead in your tracks. Instead, you come back here, whining like a whipped cur to—"

"I didn't know but what some of the rest might have had better luck," he muttered, wearily. "I came back for food and rest, and to see if you had gained any clew."

"For you to make another botch of?" was her scornful interposition, as her extended forefinger pointed quivering at the door behind him. "There's the hole you came through, Dave Pendy! See if it is large enough to let you out again."

"You drive me away like a dog, Daisy?" he muttered huskily, his face as pale as that of a corpse, but with a growing anger in his blue eyes. "You drive me out as though I were a leper, giving me only blows and curses after all I have done?"

A hard bitter laugh cut him short.

"What have you done? Played the stupid ass from beginning to end! Botched everything

I gave you to do. Knocked all my plans higher than Gilderoy's kite! And now you come whining here—bah! Once more I bid you go, Dave Pendy—and never dare show me your ugly face again until you can back it up with the record of a man!"

Stunned, cut to the very core by these bitter, contemptuous words from the lips of the one being on all the earth whom he loved, Dave Pendy backed blindly toward the door, his eyes begging the mercy which his lips refused to utter.

He saw a wild, wicked light leap into the eyes of the woman sport—he saw her spring lightly to one side, bringing one slippered foot down on a particular figure in the carpet before the couch—and a sharp cry escaped his lips as he felt the floor giving way beneath him, for then he realized to its full extent the utter baseness of the woman for love of whom he had bartered his manhood, his honor, his peace of mind—all that an honest man should hold dear!

Down he plunged, only to be caught just below his armpits and checked in his further descent, the shock seemingly crushing in his ribs and breast-bone. But more painful far was it to hear that cold, mocking laugh which came from the lips of Daisy Darling as she flung herself on the couch before him.

"How do you like it, as far as you've got, Davy, lad?" she cried mockingly, unflinchingly meeting his wild, reproachful gaze. "Neat little arrangement, isn't it? So handy for disposing of troublesome customers—dangerous callers, tiresome lovers, and worn out tools!"

The scales fell from before his eyes then, and for the first time in his life, Dave Pendy saw Daisy Darling in her true colors. It was a blow more bitter by far than death itself, and with a hollow groan, his eyes closed, his head drooped and a sickening shudder crept over his frame.

Again that mocking laugh, then the scornful speech:

"You poor, cowardly wretch! You groan and faint, where Pistol Johnny laughed me to scorn! I tried him a thousand times worse than I have you, but I could not shake his nerve even for an instant. Instead, he made my eyes quail and fall before his! If he chose, he might have made me sue for mercy, though I was free and be a helpless prisoner, just as you are—though a single touch of my foot would have hurled him down to meet the death that awaits you! But he was a man!"

"And I—a blind fool for having ever trusted you!" the entrapped gambler cried, desperation giving him the power of speech.

"More truthful than complimentary, Davy," laughed the woman sport, leaning carelessly on one elbow as she gazed with half-closed lids into the face of her victim. "And yet, I am rejoiced to see that you have regained the use of your tongue and can sling plain English once more at a body. I'm just in the mood this evening for plain speaking. I've been playing goody-goody so long, that unless I give free rein to the devil that's in me, I'll burst my boilers for good and all!"

The doomed gambler stared at her with wondering eyes, for now he began to see the being he had so madly loved, as she really was. No longer a beauty, or young and blooming. Her face seemed to suddenly grow old and hard and coarse. What had appeared to be her natural complexion, was now plainly paint and powder. The softly rounded outlines seemed to grow hard and angular.

Daisy Darling laughed as she read all this on his face, and her voice was harsher, coarser than he had ever known before, as she spoke again:

"Your eyes are beginning to open, at last, Davy, lad; but you will never breathe abroad the little discoveries you may make in this, the last hour of your life. If you feel in the mood, when you join them, you can whisper it all to the dead men and their bones, down yonder!" and she pointed downward.

Not a word did he utter, staring fixedly into her frightfully altered face. Yet it was only a stupefied amazement. His face bore no signs of personal fear. The shock had apparently paralyzed his physical senses.

Her black eyes gleamed viciously, and she showed her teeth in an ugly smile that was little short of a snarl. She resolved to shake his nerve, and make him cringe and cry for mercy before she sent him down to meet a cruel death among the drying bones that lay at the bottom of the old shaft.

"There was a time, Davy, when I fancied that I could contrive to endure you, as a sort of necessary evil, in consideration of the services which I believed you could render me; but that was before I met Pistol Johnny and began to realize what a man was. Even then I did not entirely lose all hopes of making something out of you, and gave you another trial. You made a miserable botch of it, just as you had of everything else. You came whining to me, and so sealed your own doom!"

"You know what lies below you. You know that a touch of my foot—the same foot that you put on your neck as you groveled in the dirt—the same foot you kissed, like some whimpering cur!—will send you down to everlasting

night. And you know, too, that I will show you no more mercy than I would an ugly whelp that snapped at my hand as I caressed it! But you don't know the programme that I have laid out for my own future.

"Shall I unfold it before you? Will it make your downward flight appear any more welcome? Come—speak up, Davy!"

"I know this," he said, his voice strained and unnatural as his bloodshot eyes met her burning gaze without flinching. "I know that I have been worse than a fool. I know that you are a devil, instead of the all-but angel my poor, weak heart pictured you. I know that you lied when you swore that you loved me—for you are not capable of an honest feeling. I know that you mean to murder me; but I also know that I would rather accept death at your hands than owe my life to you, now I have caught a glimpse of the foul thing you call your heart!"

Daisy Darling stared at him in undisguised amazement, for she had looked for something altogether different from this cold, stern statement. But then she laughed again, for she felt that she held a weapon in reserve which even his suddenly acquired manhood could not resist. With eyes aglow, she leaned forward, speaking rapidly, yet with painful distinctness.

Dave Pendy listened, at first coldly, then incredulously. But as she continued, his face began to grow paler, his eyes to dilate, his breath to come faster and less regularly, for he could no longer doubt the truth of her revelation, horribly strange and repulsive though it was.

She laughed aloud—mockingly, exultantly—as she noted the varying changes which took place in his countenance.

"How do you like the picture, Davy, lad? What do you think of the future?"

She paused abruptly as the sounds of rapid footsteps just beyond the door caught her ears, and then her foot fell on the hidden spring—the trap door opened its leaves, and so swiftly that he had no time to cry out—then Dave Pendy shot down out of sight, the cunningly arranged trap closing above his head, leaving no signs of the tragedy which had taken place. A faint, muffled cry—then all was silent.

A sharp rap struck the door at that instant, and leaping to her feet, Daisy Darling crossed the trap and opened the star-trap in the door, peering through it. A little cry escaped her lips as she recognized the man who stood outside and she hastily opened the door to admit him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DAISY DARLING CAPTURES A HUSBAND.

As she beheld the fall of her lover from his saddle, under the fierce blow dealt him by one of the phantom-like figures which so suddenly rose up all about in answer to the shrill whistle emitted by their guide, Zora Tiffany cried aloud in grief and dismay; but before she could do aught, a powerful arm slipped around her waist, and dragged her from the saddle. One wild scream—then a hand closed over her lips, and her senses failed her for the time being.

When she recovered she was reclining in the arms of a man, whose joyous, sobbing cry drew her eyes instantly toward his face. It was that of her father, Felix Tiffany.

No need to enter fully into the mingled joy, grief, fear, and haunting doubt which assailed them both, nor to give at length the mutual explanations which were made during the succeeding hours, when a brief synopsis will serve our every purpose.

When Dandy Darling partially lif^ed the vail from over her intricate and daring plot for the benefit of Dave Pendy, prior to sending him out to bring about the death of Thompson Hurd, she told him the truth, as far as she went. Felix Tiffany had not "skipped the town" through his own free will. Arthur Cavendish had kidnapped him, and ever since then he had been a closely watched prisoner where Zora now found him; an iron belt around his waist, with stout chains of the same metal leading from it to his wrists and ankles. He bore these irons still as he talked in broken, trembling accents to his child.

Squatting near them was a man who wore the mask and disguising gray blouse of the road-agent gang which operated under the lead of King Philip. Stolid as though made of stone, he paid no attention to the anxious questions put him so frequently by his charges, and only for the puffs of smoke that regularly streamed out from his mask, they might have taken him for some rude statue.

Suddenly he sprung into life and motion, in obedience to a faint signal which neither father nor daughter heard, and with a swift dexterity he secured a gag between each pair of jaws. As they vainly struggled, fearing worse would follow, other masked figures came to his assistance, and half-dead with fear and wretchedness, the captives were carried rather than led along a winding passage.

They caught a glimpse of a dim light ahead of them, but then a blanket or something of the sort was cast over their heads, shutting off all sight and muffling all sounds.

Some little distance further they were carried,

then lowered to the ground, in a sitting posture, with their backs supported against what seemed to be a rock wall.

"Now I want to talk to you a little, old gentleman," said a voice which Felix Tiffany could almost have sworn he recognized, despite the thick folds of the blanket which still muffled his head, "and your lovely daughter will be none the worse for paying attention, for that matter."

"If you act half-way sensible, neither one of you will be any the worse for this little adventure. I am going to give you the use of your eyes in a moment, because an event is on the point of taking place in which you are both deeply interested. Seeing is believing, and what your own eyes tell you, you can hardly doubt. When that event is well over, I will explain in why and for what purpose you two were brought here."

The voice ceased, and after a few moments silence, the muffling folds were removed from their faces. By a dim, peculiar light, they saw that two masked figures were guarding them, one on each side, holding a blanket loosely, in readiness to fling over the captives should it become necessary to restrain them or muffle such cries as their gags would permit them to utter.

They occupied a narrow niche in the rock wall, and through a misty screen of mosquito netting they could look out upon a large chamber, brilliantly lighted by crosses of candles and torches of lightwood.

A gasping sound came from the lips of Felix Tiffany as he caught sight of the most prominent figure which occupied the cavern, but one of the masked guards bent forward and he felt the keen point of a knife pricking his throat as the road-agent muttered sternly:

"'Nother squeak like that, an' salt won't save ye! Look as much as ye like, but keep a still tongue atween your jaws!"

In the center of the rock-room, stood Daisy Darling, looking almost regally beautiful through the netting which intervened. Her garb was a strange one for such surroundings, and Felix Tiffany might well have cried out in surprise as he recognized the pet sport of Tight Squeeze.

Robed in snow-white from head to foot; a mass of lace, of foamy, filmy mysteries, far beyond the powers of this poor pen to describe in detail; with jewels gleaming in her raven hair, at her throat, on her white fingers—but not one among them all flashing half so vividly as her jetty eyes—with a lace veil drooping from her head and trailing almost to the rock floor; the garb and veil of a bride!

Here and there stood masked and jacketed figures, grim witnesses for a gay bridal.

And as father and daughter stared wonderingly at the strange scene, dimly feeling that it must possess a terrible interest for them, after the words uttered by that unseen man, Woody Wilkinson was led into the chamber by two armed guards.

Woody Wilkinson—but woefully changed from the bright, eager, hopeful lover who had set out from the hotel on that night journey.

Pale as a ghost. His face worn and haggard, like that of one who has been walking through the valley of the shadow of death. His eyes sunken deep into his head, showing bloodshot at even that distance. His limbs trembling so that it seemed they must give way beneath the weight of his body, only for the support lent him by the masked guards.

Startled, filled with horror, poor Zora looked at her father, trying in vain to cry out. His eyes met hers for a moment, but as their guards moved the blanket closer, he dared not make a sound—speak he could not, for that cruel gag.

Like one in a frightful dream, Zora Tiffany watched the strange drama which was being enacted before her.

With a bright, joyous smile, Daisy Darling advanced to meet Woody Wilkinson, and then they stood side by side, half-facing the niche in which the two captives were hidden, able to see all that took place in the chamber, while invisible themselves.

As the guards drew back, her arm was entwined in his, but hers was the one that lent the other support. He seemed to shrink away, but only for an instant, and that might have been naught but the fancy of those who so breathlessly watched; for Daisy Darling looked up into his face with a smile, her black eyes glowing, her red lips parting as though in a whisper.

Though his bowed form still trembled, and his white face seemed to grow still more ashen, Woody Wilkinson no longer drew away from her side; to the contrary, he seemed to lean on her for the support he so sadly needed.

What did it all mean? Why was he so broken down, after only a few hours had passed? Why was she dressed as a bride? How dare she lean so lovingly to him—how dare smile so sweetly up into his face?

Like one in a dream, Zora Tiffany felt these questions flitting across her brain. She tried to waken, to banish the strange sight—but in vain.

The two men who had brought Woody Wilkinson in, turned and left the rock-chamber.

After a brief absence, they returned, this time escorting a fat, bald-headed man, whose little pig-eyes seemed on the point of popping from their sockets as he stared around him.

Pausing opposite the couple in the center of the chamber, one of his guards, whose full black beard streamed from beneath his mask, spoke to the last comer:

"Now you can see what you were invited to this place for, 'squire. This lady and this gentleman wish you to do a very particular service for them. You are a regularly commissioned justice of the peace, and have full power to perform the marriage ceremony, I believe?"

"I am, but—" stammered the fat man, brushing a hand across his heated brow.

"Never mind the rest. If you wish to make any remarks, please reserve them until after the ceremony is performed," sharply interposed the black-bearded mask.

"But you say you don't want any mistake made."

"If you make one, 'twill be your last!" was the stern, fierce comment of the black-bearded outlaw.

"Then I've got to say something first!" desperately cried the fat man, dropping the book which he had until now tightly clasped beneath one arm. "It won't be a legal wedding if I don't. If you don't believe me, look at the list of questions set down for our guidance, and satisfy yourself!"

A shade passed swiftly over the face of the fair bride, as though she began to realize that it was not always policy to select an ignoramus for a tool. She made a covert sign, and it was promptly acted on by the master of ceremonies.

"Have your own way, old gentleman. We are acting perfectly on the square here, though circumstances over which we have no control prevent the ceremony taking place in a church. But cut your little piece as short as possible."

The little fat man stooped for his book, fluttered the leaves with clumsy fingers until he found the desired place, then stared at the happy couple over his glasses, owl-like.

Even his dull wits could see that there was something wrong, and though he might easily have been written down an ass, without much fear of a conviction for slander, he was a fairly honest man, in or out of office.

He put all the questions which he considered were essential to a legal ceremony. Only once did Woody Wilkinson show any visible hesitation. Then Daisy Darling brought her face closer to his, her black eyes seeming to pierce to his very brain, while the black-bearded man hastily muttered:

"Speak a little louder, if you please. The gentleman is just recovering from a severe fit of sickness, and his hearing is a trifle affected."

The question was repeated, and this time Woody Wilkinson replied promptly enough in the affirmative. Still the little justice looked bewildered, though he had no excuse for any further delay, and opening the book again at the page where the legal form was printed, he began the ceremony.

It was plainly to be seen that he was new to the business, but bungle as he might, the end came all too quickly.

"May the Lord have mercy—I don't mean that!" he gasped, with a look of horror, correcting himself, and hastily pronouncing the proper words instead, then falling back and wiping the drops of cold sweat from his flushed countenance.

Wild-eyed, her heart almost ceasing to perform its functions, poor Zora Tiffany looked out from behind that screen, watching the ghastly pale countenance of her lover; listening to his hollow, unnatural tones as he spoke huskily; watching the frequent love-glances which that white-robed woman cast into his face; trying to scream out and thus burst the frightful spell which held her helpless—believing it all a horrible dream until the justice uttered those fatal words which pronounced them man and wife.

Then a gasping, gurgling cry welled up in her throat, and disguised though it was by the gag, Woody recognized her voice!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"THERE'S MANY A SLIP."

As though her poor, tortured heart had forced it out, the gag dropped from Zora's mouth, and a wild, agonizing shriek rent the air as she flung up her hands, then fell heavily across the lap of her father.

With a wild cry Woody Wilkinson turned in that direction, but before he could do more, Daisy Darling's arm was around him, and a sharp cry parted her paling lips.

Quick as thought, a blanket was flung over the head of the newly-wedded man, and two outlaws picked him up and bore him bodily away.

The black-bearded mask tapped the bewildered 'squire on the shoulder, and shoved the grim muzzle of a pistol against his ribs as he forced him away from the spot.

Felix Tiffany fought as desperately as his hampered condition would permit when his

guards tore Zora from his arms, then dragged him away, his head enveloped in a blanket.

How long she remained insensible Zora Tiffany never knew, but when her consciousness returned she was confronted by a black-bearded man, whose voice seemed strangely familiar to her despite her dazed senses.

"Your father is well, Miss Tiffany," said the man, gently preventing her from rising from the couch of skins and blankets on which she was resting. "You shall see him soon, but I must beg of you to listen to me for a few moments first."

The poor, tortured girl stared into his face vacantly for a brief space, then hid her face in her hands with a low, soul-rending sob. It all came back to her now, and as she recalled that terrible scene, it seemed as though her poor heart would break.

A swift smile swept across his face, though it vanished almost immediately. His voice was low and not unpleasant, as he spoke again:

"I see that you remember, Miss Tiffany. I feel for your rude awakening, but better a heroic remedy like this than a gradual wakening to the bitter truth. It is not too late now to tear the image of that false traitor from your heart—"

She flashed a glance up at him that cut his hypocritical speech short. She seemed about to utter a passionate retort, but a wondering look came into her eyes, followed by a shudder of powerful aversion, as she shrunk away from him.

A red light leaped into his eyes, but his voice betrayed nothing of the hot rage that really filled his heart.

"I see you have not entirely forgotten me, Miss Tiffany."

"Solomon Abrandt!" she gasped, a little shiver creeping over her frame as she pronounced the name.

"Exactly; your old lover—"

"Never that!" was her swift, indignant retort.

"A lover, if not a favored one," he persisted. "You refused to even hear me finish my tale of love, in those days gone by; but you will not be so obdurate now, I reckon!"

Something in his words or tone, rather, caused her blood to run cold in her veins. Could it be possible that there was a still lower depth of misery into which she was fated to be plunged?

"Your favored lover, Woody Wilkinson, has shamefully deserted you in favor of another woman, and—"

"A lie!" she gasped, desperately. "He was drugged—"

"You saw and heard for yourself, Zora. You know that you are clinging to a broken reed. You saw him leaning lovingly on her arm. You heard him say, in answer to that clumsy fool, that he was of lawful age and entered into the contract with his own free will and consent. But even granting that he was drugged—which I flatly deny, however—that does not make him any the less a lawfully wedded man."

"Years ago, when you were but little more than a child, I fell in love with you. You scornfully refused to listen to me then, and I went away, trying to tear your image from my heart. I fancied I had succeeded, but when I found you once more crossing my path, I realized my error. I knew the woman whom you saw wedded to Woody Wilkinson. She told me that he was playing you false, and for that reason, I had you brought here to be an eyewitness of his duplicity. You have seen. You know that he is worse than dead to you."

"Now I ask you to marry me—"

"Never! a thousand times never!" she cried passionately.

A sudden and complete change came over the man before her at that indignant rejection. His face grew pale. His eyes filled with an evil light, and his voice grew threatening:

"You have chosen, and must abide by the consequences. I would have treated you gently, with all possible consideration; would have wooed and won you as a gentleman should woo a lady; but you will not have it so. Now listen:

"Your father is here, my prisoner. He has committed a dastardly crime, for which, if surrendered to justice, he must suffer death on the gallows."

"Again you speak falsely!" cried Zora.

"I speak the truth; but do not fear," with a hard, cold laugh. "I am not going to end the life of my prospective father-in-law on the gallows. All the same, I mean he shall help me to win my precious bride. If he, too, should prove stubborn, I swear to you by all that you hold holy, I will have him tied hand and foot and put to the torture before your eyes! He shall beg of you to spare him—for you will be the one who applies the torture, since a single word from your lips can set him at liberty. You understand me, dear?"

Before his swift, devilish speech, the temporary strength of the poor girl gave way, and sinking back on the couch, she covered her face with her trembling hands.

As she remained thus, Arthur Cavendish, or

Solomon Abrandt as she had called him, made a silent signal, which was swiftly obeyed by his well-trained adherents.

As by magic the rock chamber was again lighted up, for the spot where Zora rested was close adjoining it, revealing still another startling scene.

Bound to a rude cross which was planted upright at one end of the apartment, was Felix Tiffany, stripped to the waist, a suffocating gag between his jaws, a look of utter wretchedness upon his haggard countenance.

"Look up, Zora, darling, and tell me how you like the picture!" cried the black-bearded outlaw, his eyes glowing like living coals, a hard, merciless laugh hissing through his white teeth as she mechanically complied, only to shriek and shiver with a new-born horror.

For one moment she stared wildly at the crucified form of her parent, then leaped to her feet as though to rush to his assistance. But the strong arm of the outlaw caught her, bearing her forward and holding her before the bound man.

"See for yourself that there is no deception, my precious bride!" he laughed. "Look well at what is now your father—and remember that if you still remain obstinate, within an hour from now it will be your father's corpse!"

It seemed as though the very means he took to hasten her decision in his favor, would prove disastrous to his hopes, for at that brutal speech her overtasked senses gave way, and she sunk a lifeless weight upon his shoulder.

A savage curse parted his lips, as he hastily lowered the poor girl to the floor, snatching a liquor-flask from the nearest outlaw, bathing her face and trying to pour a few drops between her tightly-clinched teeth. For some moments he was unsuccessful, but finally a trifle of the powerful liquor found its way down her throat, and with a shiver she returned to consciousness.

Arthur Cavendish caught her up in his arms and held her so that father and daughter were face to face and could look into each other's eyes. If possible, his voice was harder, more merciless than before:

"Look your last upon him in life and health, silly child! Truly, a dutiful child are you, to doom an only parent to torture and death when a single word from your lips can set him at liberty!"

"You devil—you cowardly bloodhound!"

If his lips did not pronounce these words audibly, most assuredly the eyes of Felix Tiffany flashed them at the black-bearded outlaw. At that moment he felt that he could laugh at the most cruel of deaths, rather than see his child yield to the base demands of that fiend incarnate.

But instead of displaying anger, King Philip only laughed with careless scorn, feeling perfect confidence in his ultimate success, let his victims struggle as they might.

At a wave of his hand two of the black masks hurried forward with a brazier of glowing coals, from which protruded the wood-incased handles of a couple of soldering irons. The brazier was deposited before the crucified man, and then the road-agents turned their masked faces toward their chief, as though asking his further instructions.

"Touch the old gentleman up a trifle, lads," he uttered, showing his white teeth through their jetty fringe of hair. "Just a few light and fancy touches, to let him know we are dealing with the genuine article, and mean business."

Unhesitatingly one of the black masks plucked an iron from the fire, its point red-hot, and after a swift flourish close before the face of the helpless captive, he touched the bared breast with a light, steady hand, making a rapid circuit with the implement, then drawing back with a low bow.

On the left breast of Felix Tiffany now showed a blood-red heart, in outline, burned through the skin.

The tortured man quivered from head to foot, and his ghastly white countenance became convulsed with mingled agony and terror—horrible sight for a daughter to witness!

Arthur Cavendish laughed hardly as he felt her shuddering in his arms, and bending his head, he muttered:

"Say the word and save him further torture. Marry me, and he shall go free. Refuse, and he dies a thousand deaths in one beneath the branding iron! It is your last chance—speak!"

Felix Tiffany was staring at the poor child, and in his bloodshot eyes she fancied she could read a piteous appeal for the aid which she alone could grant. A gasping cry, with words which she herself could not hear or comprehend, drew a cry of triumph from King Philip, and with a wave of his hand he shouted:

"Take away the tools, and fetch in the 'squire—lively!"

Swift obedience followed his orders, and a minute later the fat little justice was brought into the rock chamber once more to practice a certain portion of his profession in which he was very far from being proficient.

Curtly enough, King Philip told him what was wanted, but as the 'squire looked into the ghastly face of the indicated bride, all his little

manhood rebelled, and he tremblingly mustered up courage enough to stammer:

"Not unless she is willing—if you kill me by inches!"

"Speak out, darling—tell this stupid fool that it is your dearest wish to marry me, now and here!" he whispered.

"I am willing," she faltered, hardly knowing what she said.

"But I forbid the bans!" thundered a voice from beyond the crucified man, and then, as King Philip started in hot anger, there came a sharp report, and with a yell of mingled rage and bitter pain, the intended bridegroom fell heavily.

"Clean them out, lads, but take care of the girl!" shouted that voice, and a volley of shots were poured into the road-agents, as Dave Pendy leaped toward his first victim.

With a horrible curse, King Philip partly raised up and fired one shot. Pierced through the brain, Dave Pendy fell in a heap at the feet of the man of many names.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PISTOL JOHNNY KEEPS HIS VOW.

THE white mule pricks up its long ears suspiciously as it draws near the spot where the fall of the road-agent from the rocks overhanging the narrow stage-trail discovered the ambuscade and led to a train of such peculiar incidents: but its rider glanced neither to the right nor the left as he touched Al Borak with the spur to quicken his paces.

Close behind him pressed a man whom he had sworn to hunt to his death, but never once did that grim, stern rider glance backward. Steadily on, without pause, without word or glance save straight ahead, Pistol Johnny rode, returning to Tight Squeeze.

He saw a crowd gathered before the hotel, but not a muscle of his face altered as they stared toward him, then burst into loud yells and cries of savage joy, mingled with surprise.

For there, still following the cool sport, was the murderer, Thompson Hurd!

His hands were bound behind him. The noose of a lasso was drawn close around his neck, the other end tied to the saddle-horn. His face was covered with blood and dirt. His garments were tattered and stained with blood. His hat was gone. His hair, tangled and matted, fell partly over his face, adding to his hideously repulsive appearance.

"Hang the cuss! String him up! Burn him alive! He butchered his pore wife—roastin' is too good fer him!"

In a score of voices these wild, fierce cries arose, and there was a universal rush toward the doomed wretch, who, miserable as he was, shrank away until the choking lasso dragged him from his feet, face down in the dust.

Then for the first time Pistol Johnny appeared to note the yelling mob, and as Al Borak fell back on his haunches, a brace of cocked revolvers showed above his long ears.

"Back! you yelping bloodhounds!" cried Pistol Johnny, his voice hard and menacing, his steel-gray eyes glowing as though composed of molten metal. "This man belongs to me. I will kill the first among you who dares to lay so much as the weight of a finger upon him! Make way, or die!"

Only one man, but he one of a thousand.

Awes, the savage crowd split asunder, and obedient to the spur, Al Borak slowly passed between them, dragging the murderer at his heels. Slowly on, until the huge sign which hung before the hotel was reached. At a touch of the rein, the white mule halted. Pistol Johnny unfastened the lasso from around the saddle-bow, and coiling the slack in his hand, cast it over the sign board, catching the dangling end and again looping it over the pommel. Then he removed his hat and glanced coldly around him over the wondering, awed faces of the citizens who stared at him as they might have stared at a ghost.

"Gentlemen" he spoke, his voice cold, hard, emotionless. "I set Thompson Hurd free, in obedience to a solemn vow which I uttered long years ago. Now I bring him back, to fulfill another oath. I pledged you my word that he should not be allowed to entirely cheat justice. When we last stood face to face, you believed me a liar and a traitor; but now I keep the solemn pledge I gave you."

Not another word did he speak; not a single glance did he cast toward the miserable wretch who still lay prone in the dust; but with a gentle touch of the spur, he rode slowly on, dragging the now howling, cursing, raving assassin beneath the rude gallows; on, lifting Ishmael Black to his feet; on, dragging him clear of the ground; still on until the doomed wretched hung swaying, writhing, choking in mid-air.

Then he checked Al Borak, and stood motionless as a statue of stone, his back turned to the horrible spectacle, never once glancing around, never moving a muscle until that blood-curdling writhing was stilled forever in death!

Lying on a table in the dining-room of the hotel, his head propped high by pillows and blankets, was a dying man.

A strange light came into his eyes, a faint

smile marked his ghastly pale countenance as a man entered the room and moved slowly toward him.

"Just in time, Pistol Johnny!" he uttered, his voice low, yet distinct. "I began to fear that you would be too late, even if you came at all."

"You sent for me, and hard as I am, I did not care to refuse the request of one who, they told me, was on his death-bed," coldly replied the sport, halting by the side of the moribund, gazing steadily into his face.

"They told you who made that request?"

"One who called himself Arthur Cavendish, but whom they had good reason for believing to be King Philip, the road-agent."

"Their message was true, so far as it went," and again that peculiar smile passed over the face of the dying man. "I have been known as Arthur Cavendish. I am the road-agent chief, King Philip—the man you wagered a thousand dollars you would bring into camp, dead or alive! You lost that bet, Jack o' the Double Six! You neither captured me nor gave me the hurt that has signed my death-warrant."

"On the other hand, I am still alive, nor have I run away to hide myself," was the cold retort.

"The fortnight has not yet expired—"

"And when it does, Dandy Darling will hardly be in condition to put forward a claim to the stakes."

The moribund stared keenly into those cold gray eyes, then laughed softly.

"You are no fool, Pistol Johnny, and I see that you begin to suspect the truth; but you must confess that I pulled the wool over your eyes as thoroughly as I did over those of the citizens of Tight Squeeze!"

Taking a wet cloth from a basin which stood beside him, Arthur Cavendish drew a blanket over his head for a few minutes. Those gathered about, stared at each other in wonder; but with a cold smile upon his face, Pistol Johnny stood waiting, his arms folded. And he alone made no cry or start as the blanket was cast aside and the face of the dying man was once more revealed—the face of Daisy Darling, the woman sport!

Little by little, kept up by the strong liquor with which he was supplied as often as he expressed the wish, the strange being who had masqueraded under so many different names and characters, cleared away the mists and made full confession.

Gifted with a voice, face, hands and feet that might easily belong to a woman, he had assumed the character of Daisy Darling, knowing that as a woman he could make money more rapidly and with less personal risk than as a man. Then, too, his identity with King Philip would never be suspected.

In perfect keeping with his assumed character of the woman sport, he had challenged Pistol Johnny, secretly resolved to put him forever out of the way of doing further mischief, and thus leaving the impression that he had skulked away in fear of the road-agent band. He sprung the trap, but in trying to first shake the nerve of the sport, was so powerfully impressed by it, that he concluded to wait a while longer, and see if he could not put that wonderful address to practical use, though he knew he was playing with edged tools, after that question concerning Solomon Abrandt.

As he mentioned that name, a low, hoarse cry escaped from the lips of Pistol Johnny, and his eyes glowed with a sudden fire of awakened suspicion and vengeance.

A faint, sneering laugh came from the paling lips.

"Shaken at last, Jack o' the Double Six!" he cried, then his head sunk back, and the man of many names was dead!

Above stairs, on a bed lay another man. Beside him sat a fair young woman, his hand gently clasped in hers.

He was speaking, feebly, brokenly; at times so faint were his accents that none save the ear of a true lover could have interpreted their meaning.

That man was Woody Wilkinson, the woman Zora Tiffany, and he was explaining what led to that strange bridal in the rock chamber to which she had been an agonized witness.

It was an equally strange story that he told, and had her love for him been less great and all-absorbing, Zora Tiffany might easily have found excuse for not believing him.

His was a peculiar constitution. Brave enough morally, or when his blood was heated, with a chance to strike back at his enemies, Woody Wilkinson was extraordinarily susceptible to pain. In cold blood, the slightest scratch through his skin was sufficient to set his whole system to quivering with agony, just as a rude touch on an exposed nerve will cause a hardy man to cry out with pain.

Aware of this curious characteristic, King Philip had stripped him and systematically tortured him until his mind almost gave way, and he was as a terror-stricken child in his hands. Threatened with renewed and redoubled tortures, the poor wretch could only yield to their will, and it was while in this condition that the mock ceremony was performed. Of course,

though as yet neither of the young couple knew this, as the supposed Daisy Darling had not been taken or killed by the citizens when they made their opportune attack, the outlaw took all this pains in order to crush the spirit of Zora Tiffany, and in her agony of mind, make her yield to a forced, but still legal marriage with him.*

It appears that Dave Pendy escaped death in the old shaft to which Daisy Darling doomed him, by the abrupt coming of the man who shortly afterward bore that cunningly forged message to Woody Wilkinson and Zora Tiffany.

Fearful lest he should scream out for help, and thus awaken unwelcome suspicions, Daisy Darling unwittingly touched the spring that shot out the supporting platform below the regular trap, and as he dropped through the floor, this caught and supported the gambler. He gave one muffled cry, then his overtired senses abandoned him, and he lay there until long after the woman sport had left in company with her tool, to complete her daring plans.

Then he awoke, and quickly divining the truth, cut away the hinges above him, and thus effected his escape.

It will be remembered that while held fast in the trap, the pretended woman made a startling revelation to the man whom love for her had almost driven mad.

She told him that her whole life had been a lie; that the woman he loved was in reality a man; she told him, too, that before another day dawned, Zora Tiffany would be wedded to her—or more properly, him.

With his love changed to the bitterest hate, Dave Pendy hastened to collect a strong force of the citizens, and led them to the cavern, arriving just in time to save Zora Tiffany from being married to one of the most daring, most audacious and original of all the criminals whose deeds have stained the annals of the wild western country.

There is little more to add before the curtain comes down on this rude drama of wild life.

Woody Wilkinson soon recovered from the effects of that frightful experience in the clutches of King Philip, but neither Zora nor her father could ever rest content in the place where they had undergone such bitter trials. There was no one to dispute their claims to the "Four Aces," and before many days a force of men were put to work to develop the claim, sufficiently to prove its great value, when Felix Tiffany sold a half interest in it to a company who took the whole care of it off his hands.

Together they journeyed back to "civilization," and a quiet, but none the less happy wedding took place, very different from the one which had graced the rock chamber on that never-to-be-forgotten night.

Pistol Johnny saw that the ill-fated wife of Ishmael Black received Christian burial, then he mounted Al Borak and rode away from Tight Squeeze forever.

Tansy Dick sincerely mourned the loss of his "pard" for a month, then threw up his situation as driver, saying:

"They ain't but one man in the world fer me! I'm goin' to hunt him up, an' keep a huntin' till I find him, ef it takes ontel ole Gabriel toots his fish-horn—you hear the ole man a-sputtin'?"

* This may appear rather far-fetched, but the present writer speaks "by the card," having personal knowledge of a man, otherwise the perfection of strength, both mental and physical, who presents precisely this peculiarity.—THE AUTHOR.

THE END.

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